

GODBEARING IN PRACTICE: DEVELOPING SPIRITUAL  
MIDWIFERY THROUGH LISTENING-BASED EVANGELISM

A Professional Project

presented to

the Faculty of the

Claremont School of Theology

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

by

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**CLAREMONT**  
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This professional project, completed by

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has been presented to and accepted by the

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## ABSTRACT

### GODBEARING IN PRACTICE: DEVELOPING SPIRITUAL MIDWIFERY THROUGH LISTENING-BASED EVANGELISM

by

Anna Crews Camphouse

This project seeks to help persons to heal the brokenness of self and others by learning how to better listen to God, themselves, and others. There is brokenness within the self, our churches, and our world. The building of healthy relationships with God, self, and others is a key component of helping to heal the brokenness and learning how to live the abundant life. Using Jesus' life and ministry as our model, we can dare to risk openness to others and value others in radically relational ways. The foundation of building these relationships is through learning how to listen.

The author forms a small group based on the Howard Clinebell growth-group model. In this group, participants are guided through a process of learning to develop skills for listening to God, self, and others. In listening to God, centering prayer is used as a model, specifically in the style taught by Father Thomas Keating. Guided spiritual autobiography is used to help class members better listen to self, learning from one's own life experiences and one another's. Finally, participants are taught basic empathetic listening skills and encouraged to use them in practice to show God's love to others. In this way, the author helps to develop Godbearing within group members. The Godbearing concept is based upon Elaine Robinson's book of the same name. This project focuses on learning how to use listening to put Godbearing into practice in daily life.

The process of Godbearing developed in this project creates a model for listening-based evangelism. A model based on listening stresses valuing the uniqueness and diversity in others, learning with them as one forms genuine relationships. The focus of the listening-based model is not on making others believe as one thinks they should believe, but listening to what God is already doing in the faith life of the person and working with the Spirit to promote their healing and wholeness. On a larger scale, the same principle is also used when listening to the world, seeking to transform the world into becoming the just and loving place God wills it to be.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## DEDICATION

To my darling baby daughter, Sophia Anabella.

Your life inspires me to work even harder to make the world  
a better place. You are my greatest blessing.

May the abundant life be yours in full. May you be listened to and  
learn to listen to others with the depth of God's love.  
May your hurts be healed with the gentle power of God's grace.  
May you find true friendship and love in healthy relationships  
all along the way.

My deepest love and prayers go with you in your journey.

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

#### Problem

Brokenness and disempowerment have kept persons from healing and growing into the abundant life they were created for and hindered Christians' abilities to bring forth the kingdom of God into the world.

#### Importance of the Problem

The brokenness and disempowerment in persons and in our world is overwhelming. Outside the church's doors, the brokenness of persons and systems is so pervasive that it can be described as the power of sin attempting to consume the hope and goodness in a hurting world. Persons are inhibited by systems of oppression, by life situations and crises, and by the breakdown of creative and whole community from achieving the wholeness that God intends for the world and the people God created.

Inside many Christians, and the body of the church, there is also a struggle for wholeness and living of the abundant life. There are few who see the meaning of abundant life from a holistic perspective, and seemingly even fewer who are developing models for teaching persons how to claim a life that seeks to live in all fullness and help others to do the same. The popular stress on health/wealth Christianity for the individual, decreasing connection between church and community, the fundamentalist right's focus on takeover of "evangelism" and politics, and a decreased sense of worth among Christians and churches due to a variety of issues including fiscal struggles and church decline along with attitudes of scarcity all contribute to the lack of thrust toward growing persons and communities into the abundant lives they were created to live.

Starting with the individual Christian and local church community, it is now a long overdue need to redirect persons from the patterns of stress and individuality created in modern American society to patterns of empowering wholeness in Christian community. The world is in need of transformation, the bringing about of the Kingdom of God, and it is the job of the church to find ways to bring this into fruition. However, the problem is not that the church has not been talking about the Way to live and abundant life. Few have been taught to listen. Evangelism has been equated with a quick ticket into the pearly gates rather than a lifestyle directed toward healing the sin sick soul. In order to promote an evangelism of healing, the church needs to take the time and make a plan for empowering persons to have the ability to listen to God, self, and neighbor in deep and meaningful ways. The church must develop a listening-based method of evangelism that recognizes and values the unique challenges and growth of each person, alongside the vision for God's hope of transformation of the world.

### Thesis

At Ojai United Methodist Church, I will create and study a growth group that will empower laypersons to learn techniques that will increase their adeptness in listening to God, self, and others, claiming a new path towards healing and wholeness for themselves with an intent to help transform others toward abundant life as well.

### Definitions of Major Terms

Brokenness – In a very substantial way, our relationship with God, ourselves, and others is broken. As found in Henri Nouwen's book, The Wounded Healer, persons are in need of hope, a grounding in God, help with suffering, and something to help avert the

loneliness found in their lives.<sup>1</sup> Ideally, the church would be a primary place to help persons find a place to fulfill these needs. However, in recent years, the brokenness of the church and its relationships have become increasingly apparent. In addition, communities often promote individuality over communal relationship and responsibility, further deepening loneliness and increasing the intensity of need for healing and genuine relationship.

Godbearing – The term Godbearing comes from the book written by the same name by Elaine Robinson. The focus of Godbearing is in sharing God's love in radically relational ways. Reaching out to a hurting, suffering world through relationship and transformative Christian living are the way of life for the Godbearing evangelist. Robinson's Godbearing lifestyle is threefold and consists of "1) bearing God or bearing the renewed image of God within, 2) bearing witness or bearing faithful witness to God, and 3) bearing suffering or bearing with Christ the world's suffering."<sup>2</sup>

Spiritual Midwifery – From Howard Clinebell's writings regarding growth counseling, this term comes from the Greek word *maieuomai*, which means to serve as midwife.<sup>3</sup> Clinebell used this term when describing the group leader who is focused on the development of growth and wholeness in the participants of the small group. This growth was based upon the formula "GROWTH = CARING + CONFRONTATION."<sup>4</sup> Ideally, in the context of this project the leader would model the midwifery that one would hope to see later developing in the participants. In other words, the participants

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Nouwen, The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Elaine Robinson, Godbearing: Evangelism Reconceived (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 84.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Clinebell, Growth Groups: Marriage and Family Enrichment Creative Singlehood Human Liberation, Youth Work, Social Change (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1977), 41.

<sup>4</sup> Howard Clinebell, Counseling for Spiritually Empowered Wholeness: A Hope-Centered Approach (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 1995), 36.

would begin to become spiritual midwives themselves as one of the results of taking the class.

Lectio Divina – Lectio Divina is a traditional form of Christian prayer that is focused on reading the scriptures and listening to what God may want to reveal through the text. The term lectio divina means “sacred reading” and is focused on being intentional about receiving what word God wishes to share at that moment.<sup>5</sup> Through reading, reflecting, responding, and resting with a passage of scripture, persons are able to listen to the Spirit speaking to them through the scriptures in a deep, rich way.<sup>6</sup>

Centering Prayer – Centering prayer is a model of meditative prayer that serves as a bridge to contemplative prayer practices. Modeled after the practices described by Father Thomas Keating, centering prayer is a time set aside to intentionally focus on developing inner silence to create a space of openness for the presence of God to act within. One waits for the movement of the Divine and seeks to be transformed through the mysterious working of the Holy Spirit. Keating states, “Contemplative prayer is part of a dynamic process that evolves through personal relationship rather than by strategy.”<sup>7</sup> The relationship is with the Divine and the process entails being committed to allowing our true selves in the innermost parts of our being to become one with God. Then, we must seek to live the love experienced in prayer out in the world around us.

Guided Spiritual Autobiography – Based on the work of James Birren and Donna Deutchman along with a combination of faith-based thinking from William Clements’ class on this subject, guided spiritual autobiography is a small group exercise that seeks

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah Butler, “Lectio Divina as a Tool for Discernment,” in The Divine Indwelling: Centering Prayer and Its Development, by Thomas Keating, et. al. (New York: Lantern Books, 2001), 25.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Butler, 26.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1994), 15.

to build relationships based on the sharing of life stories. Through the writing of two-paged essays on selected topics, small group participants share major pieces of their life story within the group. This not only deepens the relationship between participants, but also deepens the relationship within the self and builds self-esteem. “Often, feelings of significance are derived not from rediscovery or reappraisal of a single major experience but rather from reviewing the life course as a whole—discovering the cumulative experiences and what they add up to.”<sup>8</sup> By realizing the value of their individual stories and those of others in the group, guided spiritual autobiography works as a model for learning to listen and value persons for who they are.

Empathetic Listening – Empathetic listening is a non-judgmental approach to listening whose main focus is to discover with the speaker the deeper meaning of what is being said in order that both the speaker and the listener may learn together and be strengthened in value and relationship. Empathetic listening is not about having the right answer or feeling pressure that one must come up with something to say. Empathetic listening is about truly searching for the meaning in what the other person is trying to say, hearing the depth of feeling in the person who is speaking, and showing them that you value them for who they are in that particular moment and time. By listening first to God, then knowing one’s own strengths and limitations, one can be free and focused to be able to genuinely listen to the heart of the other. Empathetic listening is a key factor in living the Godbearing life.

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<sup>8</sup> James E. Birren and Donna E. Deutchman, Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults: Exploring the Fabric of Life (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 6.

### Work Previously Done in the Field

At present, the idea of pastoral care-based evangelism through listening practices for the purpose of creating wholeness and transformation is a hybrid idea that I have not found in the literature. While listening has been recognized as a part of evangelism, I have not discovered a model that is based on listening as the major tool for sharing the evangel. There are definitely materials in the major fields of pastoral care, evangelism, and church development that will be helpful to my project. I will continue to seek out literature that may be available that would be similar to my overall idea, but have not seen a similar proposal to mine to date.

This project brings together ideas and major concepts from several fields, but is a border concept. The lens that I will be looking through to describe my approach to the project is pastoral care. In particular, the concepts about empowerment, listening, and wholeness will come from a pastoral care perspective. In addition, evangelism will also be examined and re-visioned for this project. A number of authors will be utilized to deepen understanding and connect these fields to one another in this particular way.

From the field of pastoral care, I will rely greatly on the work of Howard Clinebell. Clinebell has written extensively on wholeness, wellness, and spirituality. He has also written a good deal on the use of small groups for growth, both personally and for social impact. His works in these fields are cited in the bibliography of this project. I will also refer to a number of books regarding listening from a pastoral care lens with emphases on James Birren and Donna Deutchmann's Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults: Exploring the Fabric of Life, Thomas Keating's Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel, and empathetic listening texts such as

Michael Nichols' The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships.<sup>9</sup>

I will then take these concepts and combine them into a pastoral care listening-based evangelism model. Pastoral care evangelism focuses on the person and promoting abundant life and valuing the other rather than promoting a system that one needs to be saved by promulgating an ethic of fear or self-denigration. Some of the authors that will be helpful in broadening this concept are Call and Response Biblical Foundations for a Theology of Evangelism by Walter Klaiber, Evangelism and Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit by Albert Outler, and Godbearing Evangelism Reconceived by Elaine Robinson.<sup>10</sup> Reflecting on texts such as these, I will develop a pastoral care based evangelism that combines with a discussion of healing, empowerment through relationship building, and abundant life reflected on throughout the project. Being with persons in their suffering and walking with them to a place of healing will be of special importance in the development of Godbearing in practice.

For the purpose of talking about brokenness, I will research a variety of authors. In discussing the brokenness of self, there will be a thorough discussion of the classic text The Wounded Healer by Henri Nouwen. When talking about the specific problems of churches trying to become more growth-centered, the books Beyond Decline A Challenge to the Churches by Robin Gill and Can this Church Live? by Donald Matthews

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<sup>9</sup> Birren and Deutchmann, Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults; Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart; Michael P. Nichols, The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships (New York: Gilford Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Walter Klaiber, Call and Response: Biblical Foundations of a Theology of Evangelism, translated by Howard Perry-Trauthig and James A. Dwyer (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997). Originally published as Ruf und Antwort: Biblische Grundlagen einer Theologie der Evangelisation (Neudirchen-Vluyn, Germany: Christliches Verlagshaus GmbH, Stuttgart, and Neukirchener Verlag, 1990); Albert Outler, Evangelism and Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1996); Elaine Robinson, Godbearing: Evangelism Reconceived (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006).



will be among those used. In illuminating the problems of broken community, Robert Linthicum's Transforming Power Biblical Strategies for Making a Difference in Your Community and Ichiro Kawachi and Bruce Kennedy's The Health of Nations Why Inequality is Harmful to Your Health will help to describe some of the problems of disempowerment and inequality found in today's world.<sup>11</sup>

### Scope and Limitations of the Project

This project is set in a California-Pacific Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church context. More specifically, Ojai United Methodist Church of Ojai, California will be the setting. This project will document the model, method, and approach used by one pastor at one United Methodist Church. It will focus on growth-oriented persons within the congregation, discussing not only how they were chosen, but also their learning and reflections.

### Procedure for Integration (Methodology)

This project will combine research in the fields of pastoral care and evangelism with a group case study on a listening model as a base for evangelism. Bringing together all of these areas of interest, I will then seek to build a research plan based on narrative research models. I will start by reviewing some of the basic concepts in Research in Pastoral Care and Counseling Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches by Larry VandeCreek. Then, I will combine the pastoral care approach with models from books such as Up Close and Personal The Teaching and Learning of Narrative Research edited

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<sup>11</sup> Nouwen, Wounded Healer; Robin Gill, The Empty Church Revisited (Aldershot, Nants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003); Donald H. Matthews, Can This Church Live?: A Congregation, Its Neighborhood, and Social Transformation (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2004); Robert C. Linthicum, Transforming Power: Biblical Strategies for Making a Difference in Your Community (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003); Ichiro Kawachi and Bruce P. Kennedy, The Health of Nations: Why Inequality is Harmful to Your Health (New York: New Press, 2002).

by Ruthellen Johnson, Amia Lieblich, and Dan McAdams, Narrative Inquiry Experience and Story in Qualitative Research by Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly, and Qualitative Research in Practice Examples for Discussion and Analysis by Saran B. Merriam and Associates.<sup>12</sup> Looking at how others have implemented research strategies, I will formulate a project for Ojai UMC that will be true to the field of narrative research through the lens of pastoral care while at the same time also remain beneficial for the church.

Built as a case study, this model will highlight three different listening approaches, listening to God, self, and others, through the work of a growth group. It will take place during sessions formed over the course of five weeks in six separate sessions. There will be documentation of the information presented by the leader during the sessions, as well as reflections from the participants during the class. Effectiveness of listening training will also be assessed by utilizing self-evaluation forms before the class starts and after the last session.

### Chapter Outlines

#### Chapter 1 – Introduction

This chapter will outline the problem of brokenness and disempowerment and goals of the project. It will also include a definition of terms, previous work in the field, and a repeatable and accessible methodology.

#### Chapter 2 – Brokenness and Disempowerment

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<sup>12</sup> Larry VandeCreek, Hilary E. Bender, and Merle R. Jordan, Research in Pastoral Care and Counseling: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches (Journal of Pastoral Care Publications, 1994); Ruthellen Josselson, Amia Lieblich, and Dan P. McAdams, eds., Up Close and Personal: The Teaching and Learning of Narrative Action Research (Washington, D.C: American Psychological Association, 2003); D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000); Sharan B. Merriam and Associates, Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis (San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers, 2002).

There will be three main areas of discussion in this chapter. The first area, *Broken Self, Broken Church, Broken Community*, will focus on the inhibitors in each of these areas which contribute to the inability of persons to work towards health and wholeness. The inability for persons to strive toward wholeness then results in a feeling of disempowerment. The second area, *The Effects of Disempowerment*, will enumerate some of the ways disempowerment has limited positive methods churches and Christians may bring others into abundant life and the Kingdom of God, along with some of the dangers this limitation has caused in society. The third area, *Empowerment Through Relationship*, will describe the importance of nurturing healthy relationships through love of God and neighbor from a Wesleyan perspective.

### Chapter 3 – Evangelism through the Lens of Pastoral Care

The third chapter will engage the intersection between my own theological views of evangelism and pastoral care. Section one, *A Brief History of Mission*, will review some of the history of mission and evangelism and discuss its implications for a postmodern evangelistic paradigm. Section two, *The Broader Context of Global Perspective*, will elaborate on the need for not only ecumenical relationship building but also being open to interfaith dialogue and relationships as one works to build a truly global understanding of evangelism and mission. Section three, *Pastoral Care Implications of Evangelism Doctrines and Key Terms*, will discuss some of the specific pastoral care concerns related to several doctrines and key terms of evangelism, limiting the review to relevant information for the intersection of evangelism and pastoral care as much as possible. Section four, *The Good News of Healing*, will expound upon my definition of evangelism that is based on salvation derived from the Latin *salve* which

means “to heal”. The healing discussed will also lead into a reflection on the meaning of abundant life and its importance in the Christian life. Section five, *The Kingdom of God: Transformation of Self and World to Wholeness*, will engage the communal nature of our faith and the importance of moving from growth and change within the self to growth and change within the world. There will be particular emphasis on the use of Godbearing in order to accomplish this task.

#### Chapter 4 – Wholeness and Empowerment through Listening Practices

The fourth chapter will describe some of the practical ways to begin to move persons through listening toward growth and healing that results in wholeness and empowerment. I will begin with a section referencing the work of Howard Clinebell in this field, including some of his hopes for growth counseling and description of effective growth groups. The second through fourth sections in this chapter will discuss listening approaches and rationale for the usefulness of such approaches. The second section, *Listening to God*, will reflect on ways that one might engage with listening to the divine, particularly highlighting centering prayer and Lectio Divina. The third section, *Listening to Self*, will reiterate the importance of self-care and self-growth, specifically focusing on the use of guided spiritual autobiography. The fourth section, *Listening to Others*, will engage several approaches to improving empathetic listening skills and working towards full engagement with others by listening them into being.

#### Chapter 5 – Case Study with Listening Model

The fifth chapter will describe the formation, implementation, and results of a six-session class focused on building up listening skills with persons from Ojai United Methodist Church. A growth group will be formed during this period using Clinebell’s

work as a guide to its development. Persons will learn about and increase their listening abilities with God, self, and neighbor during the class, and be encouraged to continue practicing their learning in the future. Discussion about selection of individuals for the project, the results of the class learning, and follow up will be described.

### Chapter 6 – Conclusion

The conclusion will review the Listening Model growth group as a path towards effective pastoral-care based evangelism through Godbearing. It will also discuss the importance of openness to others and willingness to co-create with God for the betterment of all creation. It will highlight the abundant life, human need for wholeness and healing, and the importance of transformational evangelism discussing ways to continue to refine listening-based evangelism at Ojai UMC, as well as potential other churches, in the future.

## CHAPTER 2

### Brokenness and Disempowerment

Beginning with the story of Adam and Eve in the garden, persons stemming from the Hebrew tradition and its history have been trying to figure out the question of what went wrong with humanity. Even before the story of the garden was written, other cultures had their own creation myths that also tried to give meaning to the human predicament of suffering and brokenness. Yet, no matter where the brokenness came from, the problem remains that a broken system has emerged throughout time in every stage of human development. Today some of the effects of brokenness can be seen in broken selves, broken churches, and broken communities.

#### The Broken Self

Three decades ago, Henri Nouwen wrote a primary text relating to the broken self and how pain influences both the human perspective and the capacity to heal others through vital ministries. In this text, *The Wounded Healer*, Nouwen focused on four areas that recognized human angst and provided opportunity for hope in the midst of angst as well. This key text is illustrative of many problems that humanity is facing in modern times, and worthy of review in the context of this section.

The first of these areas centered on the concept of “nuclear man.”<sup>1</sup> Nuclear man is Nouwen’s term for the current generation of young persons in the 1970s who were experiencing a disconnection from both history and hope for the future. Rather than look for ways to appreciate the rich history of the past, nuclear man only experiences the present as a failure of the past to develop in connected, life-affirming ways. The

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<sup>1</sup> Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, 5.

problems of the present are blamed on the forefathers and generations prior to their arrival. Therefore, nuclear man is trapped into loss of hope that there is a future at all. Because this is the case, Nouwen's current generation not only has exceptionally poor boundaries—wanting to live in any and every way possible whether it is healthy or not, but also needs to be liberated from apathy and freed to reclaim the power of the creative self and connection with the greater realm of humanity. The ways Nouwen suggests for accomplishing this worthy task are by the mystical way, the revolutionary way, or the Christian way – which he describes as a combination of both mystical and revolutionary.<sup>2</sup>

The second area of concern for Nouwen regarding the wounded and broken self is the problem of being a rootless generation. The generation that Nouwen addresses is one that has begun to look inward for answers they cannot find by looking for an outward, “other-than” God or religion. These persons are understood as fatherless and trapped in the decisions of their contemporaries due to the fact they have no concern for history and an appalling need to rebuke authority figures. Along with these characteristics, persons are also reacting in convulsive ways to the pressures and needs of modern society, choosing to hurt or kill themselves rather than to succumb to any societal pressures from a culture they have already deemed unfit and unfair.<sup>3</sup> To these problems, Nouwen suggests Christian leaders need to develop the skills of articulating inner events. They must lead persons back into a relationship with the divine in a way that appreciates mysticism, mystery, and compassion so that one would see fellow humans as worthy of genuine relationship, forgiveness, and love. Leaders must develop contemplation; being

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<sup>2</sup> Nouwen, Wounded Healer, 16-20.

<sup>3</sup> Nouwen, Wounded Healer, 27-36.

able to look at life in such a way as to see the deeper issues disturbing the human situation, as well as the beauty of humanity and the world as well.<sup>4</sup>

The third area that Nouwen articulated as a need in modern times is that of connection that gives hope to the hopeless. Using the example of a man dying in a hospital and a Clinical Pastoral Education intern, Nouwen underscored how easily persons in ministry overlook the deeper needs of the broken, wounded self. Mr. Harrison, the patient who died, expressed in a short conversation with the intern the feeling of being in a milieu that was impersonal to him and to which he did not belong, his growing fear of an impersonal death, and his fear of continuing to live a lonely, impersonal life.<sup>5</sup> Mr. Harrison was in need of some form of connectedness through real human relationship and someone who cared. Nouwen suggests that an approach by the student that would have been most helpful is one focused on the personal touch of knowing someone was genuinely caring for Mr. Harrison and his well-being, of promising to wait for Mr. Harrison to get out of surgery and to return and continue the relationship they were building, and to know that even in death there would be someone waiting for him in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup> The Christian leader is one who knows how to connect with others and show personal concern, help persons to find meaning in their life and have faith in that meaning, and call persons to a genuine hope that enables the overcoming of fear.<sup>7</sup>

The final area of need is one that strikes at the heart of ministry. Nouwen addresses the subject of the loneliness of ministry and the need to be able to heal others

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<sup>4</sup> Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, 37-45.

<sup>5</sup> Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, 55-62.

<sup>6</sup> Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, 63-70.

<sup>7</sup> Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, 71-77.



while at the same time working to heal oneself. He recognizes that ministry holds both the personal loneliness of the disconnection experienced in the human condition and also the professional loneliness found in not being able to connect with others in the meaningful ways ministers feel called to do.<sup>8</sup> However, Nouwen proposes that a solution to the loneliness is the development of hospitality through ministry. Hospitality is accomplished through learning concentration and developing true Christian community. In concentration, one is to intentionally withdraw oneself in order to make room for the other to grow. Nouwen states, “By withdrawing into ourselves, not out of self-pity but out of humility, we create the space for another to be himself and to come to us on his own terms.”<sup>9</sup> Even God is used as an example of creating “other” by the withdrawal of part of God’s self in the beginning of creation. Then, the development of true Christian community is recognizing the commonality in our brokenness and working together to find and live in hope and new vision.<sup>10</sup>

Although this work was written a generation ago, many of these concepts are still true today, perhaps even more so than the time in which they were written. Humans still experience incredible disconnectedness from one another and from our world. Our relationships are broken and our spirits are pained. There are still those who are looking for people to blame for the degradation of our global society, and many of them are looking to immediate predecessors and persons with power and authority as the guilty parties for the pain seen in our world. There are many who live in constant fear, in American society and others, that the future is not going to be available for much longer. In the United States, an ethic of fear has driven concerns resulting in attacks on countries

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<sup>8</sup> Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, 81-86.

<sup>9</sup> Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, 91.

<sup>10</sup> Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, 93.

such as Iraq and Afghanistan, shifted increasing amounts of aid to Israel, caused increased breakdown of communication with countries like Iran and North Korea, and created the understanding by some Americans and many in the world that America is “policing the globe”.

The problem of brokenness is very evident at the most personal levels. In agreement with Nouwen, there is much to be done to work toward the healing of the world and her peoples as well as its perceptions about Christianity and the person of Jesus. We must break the loneliness and establish genuine connection with others, caring while lovingly confronting ourselves and others in ways that promote growth of persons and community as well as increasing hospitality in a hurting world. As Nouwen suggests, the author concurs that a vital way of helping this change to occur is learning how to heal self before healing others and withdrawing by intensive listening in order to allow room and opportunity for the other to grow.

### The Broken Church

Robin Gill, a British author who has studied church decline for a number of years, describes a stark picture of the numerical decline of the church. Although Gill’s main focus is the church within England, he also represents data gleaned from other countries as well. Regarding America, Gill writes

Even in the United States, despite much evidence of comparative resilience of religious participation, there is also tentative evidence of recent decline. Gallup Polls over the past fifty years have suggested comparatively high levels of regular churchgoing at approximately two-fifths of the population, yet in the 1950s this rose to almost half the population. And the blunt Gallup question “What is your religious denomination?” shows an increase in no-religion responses in five decades from 2 percent to 11 percent. Until the mid-1960s the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* charted overall membership of religious bodies in the United States, both Christian and non-Christian,

measured against the total population. This suggested a remarkable rise from 16 percent in 1850, to 36 percent in 1900, to 47 percent in 1930, to 57 percent in 1950, rising finally to 64.3 percent in 1970, but had declined to 59.5 percent in 1980 and to 59.3 percent in 1990.<sup>11</sup>

It is not a secret that mainline churches in America have been in decline. What has been the subject of more than a little research on this decline is finding out the reasons why persons have stopped going to church and the issues surrounding this fact.

One theory on the decline of the church is the incongruity between theological theory or dogma and the practice of these beliefs within local churches. Gill proposes a growing anti-intellectual attitude within the churches that has been inverse to the growing need for knowledge and intellectualism in the culture at large.<sup>12</sup> Due to the negativity surrounding intellectualism in the church, parishioners are robbed of having support from the church in combining their Christian beliefs with social needs and issues.<sup>13</sup> The misconception that Gill brings to the forefront of his discussion is the belief that persons within churches are united, and more importantly uniform, regarding theological and social issues. Gill claims this misconception has caused pain in the church and misunderstandings outside the church as well.<sup>14</sup> Rather than being in agreement with the open acceptance of persons of all classes and races, persons have viewed the current church to be one that states this doctrine from a place of hypocrisy. These views regarding equality are not seen to be lived out in the local church.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Gill, Empty Church Revisited, 210.

<sup>12</sup> Robin Gill, Beyond Decline A Challenge to the Churches (London: SCM Press, 1988), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Gill, Beyond Decline, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Gill, Beyond Decline, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Gill, Beyond Decline, 10-11.

Gill hopes that academia and parishes will be more closely linked in the future, thus avoiding some of the dangers inherent in the gap between theory and practice which is fueled by an anti-intellectualist stance. He states

The issues debated by theologians today are not usually so divorced from the active life of the church. They certainly can be corrected by this and should, as I have argued, regard church life as an important test of theological validity. In turn, I am convinced that congregations can be led gently towards a more discerning and critical understanding of Christian beliefs. Indeed, a genuine path to Christian unity may not be discovered until Christians generally are more prepared to discern and appreciate the pluralism of Christianity in its many forms. The gospel is too rich to be captured in single forms. Once Christian faith is seen primarily as a relationship—our relationship to God in Christ—Christians may learn not to confuse partial doctrines and forms of words with the relationship itself.<sup>16</sup>

Rather than a strict adherence to doctrine and dogma, Gill supports the growth of a relational Christianity that leaves room for change and development in both individuals and communities of faith. In this way, he leaves space available for new perspectives on old ideas as well as reflection upon traditional theologies and their application to the modern world. Both are necessary for both the health of churches and the health of individuals growing spiritually.

Donald Matthews also critiques the church as having the problem of not being able to combine a theology of equality for all with a practice of inclusion within the church. Writing from an African-American perspective, he criticizes the church for being overly homogenous.<sup>17</sup> Rather than supporting the inclusion of a multicultural dynamic, Matthews reports that American churches have been all too comfortable in supporting the idea of church growth being substantially related to the development over time of ethnic enclaves that suited a particular need of a particular community at a

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<sup>16</sup> Gill, *Beyond Decline*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Matthews, *Can This Church Live?*, 18.

particular time in history. As the time for that ethnic strata need changed, however, the church did not change with it, thus leaving the church in a situation of decline.<sup>18</sup> To support this assumption, Matthews quotes statistics that nine-tenths of American Christians worship in churches that have a membership of different ethnic groups as less than ten percent of the church's population.<sup>19</sup> Equally troubling is the realization that "only 7.5 percent of congregations in the United States are racially mixed and half of those are mixed due to temporary demographic shifts."<sup>20</sup>

Matthews asserts that churches are meant to be the hub of American neighborhoods. Churches are meant to contribute to the health and general state of well-being of our communities. Yet, this centralization of church related to community has not taken hold, in part due to the continuing problem of homogeneity and closed-attitudes toward inclusion.<sup>21</sup> Rather than having a closed approach toward diversity and inclusion, Matthews suggests

Churches are still the places that people look to for solace and a sense of companionship in a world that is beset by economic troubles, business failures, terrorist scares and the rest of the everyday dangers that go with life in a highly technical, urban society. ... The life of the church is dependent on its willingness to allow for regular transfusions of new blood in its system. Help the church live by expanding its social borders and challenging its members to be models of a social reality that has yet to be achieved by the overwhelming majority of churches in the United States. Churches based on inclusiveness will have difficulties, but the answer to their difficulties will be in the problem itself. We must learn how to live with difference for the greater purpose of God and the church as it was intended to be.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Matthews, Can This Church Live?, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Matthews, Can This Church Live?, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Matthews, Can This Church Live?, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Matthews, Can This Church Live?, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Matthews, Can This Church Live?, 118-19.

The treasure of differences in individuals and communities breeds learning and growth. Churches that do not seek the opportunity to reach out to individuals with differing viewpoints and backgrounds will quickly fade into the mist of the antiquated faith community. As the world continues to diversify and the global community becomes closer and closer to the local community, it is increasingly necessary to remember and appreciate diversity as a gift from God. Diversity needs to be cherished and nurtured into genuine relationship within the church rather than feared as a disconnected “other” outside the bounds of an insulated church congregation.

Alice Mann combines her arguments regarding church decline as having both external and internal causes. Mann notes that mainline churches in America have indeed experienced a similar trend in the rise and fall of number of churchgoers in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From 1950 to 1965, the mainline denominations as a group received a growth in cumulative membership from 19.2 million people to 26.5 million people. However, after 1965, these denominations have seen a steady decline in numbers that have brought the membership back down to 20.4 million as recently as 1995.<sup>23</sup> American society went through many shifts and changes in the 1960s that shifted the cultural dynamic away from church membership. Cynicism towards authority took root and Americans began to distrust institutions of all kinds, including the organized church.<sup>24</sup> Three gaps which add to the problem of reconnecting church and culture are noted in the following quote:

*An ethics gap.* People generally disconnect who they are (e.g. “an honest person”) from what they do (what they report on their tax forms; perhaps

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<sup>23</sup> Alice Mann, Can Our Church Live?: Redeveloping Congregations in Decline ([Bethesda, MD]: Alban Institute, 1999), 15.

<sup>24</sup> Mann, Can Our Church Live?, 18.

only one person in ten has a faith that makes a pervasive and visible difference in his or her life.)

*A knowledge gap.* Many of those who assent to Christian doctrines like the divinity of Jesus lack even the simplest knowledge of the biblical story or other aspects of their faith tradition.

*A gap between believing and belonging.* Americans view religion as a purely individual matter, and do not see “congregating” as an integral expression of faith. This attitude is held by church attenders almost as strongly as by the unchurched.<sup>25</sup>

These gaps show an alarming reality that church has maintained little relevance within the culture and heart of persons today. Unless the church reconnects with the culture that surrounds each building and sanctuary where congregations are still meeting, this trend is likely to continue to support declining numbers of membership in churches in the years to come.

Regarding internal problems of churches, Mann stresses the importance of knowing the primary mission of one’s congregation. Without a clear mission or “fundamental reason for being”<sup>26</sup> there can be no real hope for the drastic changes which need to take place to actually come about. A congregation needs to take its history into account, but only insofar as it helps the congregation to make its basic mission impeccably clear. Once the congregation has determined its core mission, it can then have the freedom to change whatever it needs to change, no matter how drastic it may seem, in order to meet the goal of its mission. In fact, the congregation must die to old ways in order to be able to grow in new ways. Without knowing the core mission, this cannot be done because there is the fear of loss of identity. However, if all are agreed on their core identity and the purpose they are meant to fulfill, congregations can go boldly

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<sup>25</sup> Mann, Can Our Church Live?, 18-19.

<sup>26</sup> Mann, Can Our Church Live?, 22.

forward into a new realm without fear of alienation from their tradition or from one another.<sup>27</sup>

Now that the mission field is no longer restricted to some foreign land and surprisingly found in one's own backyard or community, thinking about how the church can best use its resources to accomplish ministry in their own neighborhood is crucial to fulfilling its mission.<sup>28</sup> The accomplishment of this mission may include such radical shifts as sale of current buildings and grounds, changing of a congregation's rituals, and reaching out to the community in ways that may have felt uncomfortable for church people to even consider in past years. Again, if the mission is clear and the identity of the congregation is secure, these changes can be made to move forward in positive ways, even if there is a great deal of sacrifice in order to gain the greater goal of promoting the mission and ministry of the church.<sup>29</sup> Numerical growth cannot be the primary focus. The fulfillment of the mission must become the primary focus. Yet, it is inevitable that churches who fulfill their mission in these ways have a much greater likelihood to grow numerically as well.<sup>30</sup>

### The Broken Community

It is not difficult to see the painful effects of broken community in the world today. One can see it in the faces of those countless thousands who are slaughtered in wars around the world or starved to death. One can see it in the systems whose oppression stays present in a world that gives it permission and fuel to continue to oppress. One can feel it in the loneliness of personhood, the fear and hopelessness within

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<sup>27</sup> Mann, Can Our Church Live?, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Mann, Can Our Church Live?, 23.

<sup>29</sup> Mann, Can Our Church Live?, 26.

<sup>30</sup> Mann, Can Our Church Live?, 27.



the church, and the incredible inequity in the world. Of course, the question of the ages is what does one do with the chaos found in the world, and how does one see that chaos differently? Humanity is part of an intricate web of interrelatedness with one another and the planet. How do we begin to understand the brokenness in a new light?

### Chaos Theory

John Jefferson Davis debates the implications of chaos theory on the understanding of how God works in the world. In particular, his writing delves into the questions of free will and providence, chance and determinism, reductionism and a deeper knowledge of what helps to create and sustain order. Davis reviews the history of chaos theory to form the basis of his argument in favor of chaos' positive use in Christian theology. He examines the reaction of the butterfly flapping its wing in one part of the world and its effect on another part of the globe, otherwise known as "the butterfly effect." He discusses how scientists have struggled with the idea of pure chance and the unpredictability of systems. From the weather to geometry and population to thermodynamics, there is an inherent randomness that cannot be ignored.<sup>31</sup>

Although theologians and scientists in the past have looked to prove a more deterministic nature and set of laws governing everything, Davis argues the role of chance actually supports providence and God's creativity rather than becomes the exception. Nature even uses chaos to support biological survival and evolution to new forms. Chaos also helps the world to not be bound by deterministic fatalism and actually gives some logic to how free will can work within the universe. There is a predictability horizon beyond which one cannot know the future. For example, the weather cannot

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<sup>31</sup> John Jefferson Davis, The Frontiers of Science and Faith: Examining Questions from the Big Bang to the End of the Universe (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 73.

safely be predicted past a two week period. The influence of free will has impact on what happens.<sup>32</sup>

Davis also argues that it is chaos helping to form order within the world. Random events can create greater order. Chance can enhance providence by acting to change what may have otherwise been less orderly without the temporary chaos. This is a comforting and disturbing thought. It is comforting to know some of humanity's best life lessons and opportunities spring out of random events of chaos, some positive and some negative. It is equally disturbing because many persons and communities are rarely ready for these thoughts.<sup>33</sup>

In spite of these arguments, there is a learned hopelessness in the human reaction to the chaos of our lives and our world that continues to give power to the brokenness of these systems. One begins to wonder in a state of confusion and hopelessness about the omnipotence of a God who would allow such things to happen. However, in this state of mind we are not considering all the possibilities of omniscience and omnipotence.

Can God know everything? If God does know everything, how does that interrelate with concepts like free will? The Peacock proposal states that God is self-limited in knowledge. The proposal is built upon the supposition that nature has a genuine indeterminacy. There is a certain unpredictability in nature that cannot be explained by simply looking deeper. There are things that one simply cannot know until they happen. Because this is true, the concepts of free will and self-determinacy are assured. For Peacock, God has self-limited for the sake of the freedom of creation to create itself. Omniscience for Peacock is not defined as knowing everything that will

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<sup>32</sup> Davis, Frontiers of Science and Faith, 73.

<sup>33</sup> Davis, Frontiers of Science and Faith, 74.

ever happen and exactly how it will happen. “Omniscience is redefined to mean “knowledge of all things that are possible to know” rather than “knowledge of all things that could conceivably be known.”<sup>34</sup> God knows about all possibilities, not about all actual outcomes. God does not control every detail of what is going to happen. This provides room for both freedom to co-create the future with God’s help, as well as a deep responsibility for humanity to fulfill this calling.

Arguing against concepts of theistic evolution or total fiat creationism, Bernard Ramm proposed a concept known as progressive creation. In progressive creation, Ramm states there was not a single creation event, but a series of creation events over the course of history. Ramm hoped that his argument would silence fundamentalists by his proposal of a new option, but that did not occur.<sup>35</sup> However, Davis supports the idea that progressive creation is still a beneficial concept and finds ways to support his view.

Davis begins by explaining scripture’s intention as being different from the fundamentalist view, particularly of ex nihilo creation. He states that scholars have supported the idea that Genesis’ first chapters are not a step by step argument for the intricate physical workings of the world. These chapters are written in a day where polytheism and dissension ruled, and Genesis promotes a God who is monotheistic and just. Writers were more apt to be talking about the relationship of God to the world and humanity with the creation rather than a more scientific functional focus. *Bara*, the Hebrew word for create, is used in the scripture not to be antithetical to the natural in favor of the supernatural. *Bara* can encompass both meanings or either meaning. God could create from nothing, but that does not necessarily have to be the case. God still

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<sup>34</sup> Davis, Frontiers of Science and Faith, 40.

<sup>35</sup> Davis, Frontiers of Science and Faith, 114.

creates, regardless of what God created it from. God, in relationship to creation, is constantly creating through both natural and supernatural processes.<sup>36</sup>

It is a crucial element of humanity's calling to create with God a better future for all. However, some systems and persons within those systems have given up this power, sometimes more unconsciously than others, and allowed the broken systems to continue to reap havoc upon the lives of individuals and communities rather than taking up the mission to passionately work together to create a better world for all. Humanity must listen and believe the message of order that comes from the chaos, feel the weight of responsibility that free will carries to spur persons to action, and put forth a genuine natural effort to co-create a connected, loving future in tandem with God's supernatural work.

### The Effects of Disempowerment

The systems that run our world and our communities are broken. As persons have lost their connections with one another and the church has become an ineffective mediator in the transformation of society, systems of injustice continue to remain in control of the world. There is hurt and oppression from every corner, and the evil that has taken over the world is no longer merely an individual problem, it is a global problem.

Robert Linthicum describes some of the problems of disempowering persons and communities through the Biblical example found in Ezekiel 23. Using this chapter from Ezekiel, Linthicum outlines the need for change in a culture that has the three major problems illustrated in this section of Scripture: "a religion of domination, a politics of

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<sup>36</sup> Davis, Frontiers of Science and Faith, 116.

oppression, and an economics of exploitation.”<sup>37</sup> In this explanation he contrasts a potentially healthy system as one that has an “ascending spiral” that leads persons toward God in genuine relationship, practices justice in all its political dealings and eliminates poverty by providing equity in its economic structure against the “descending spiral” found in Ezekiel 23. Linthicum states that Ezekiel

perceives that the decay of a society begins with its economic system, when managers make as great a profit for themselves as possible, no matter how much that leads to the exploitation of the people. The more the economic system exploits the people, the more it needs to call upon the political system to use power to oppress by creating and interpreting laws to favor the economic system. Thus the collusion of the political system with the economic system allows for and permits greater exploitation.<sup>38</sup>

The contrasting vision to this view of a descending political and economic spiral is one that focuses on empowerment of the people. Linthicum uses Nehemiah as the primary biblical example for learning how to empower communities to action. In the example of Nehemiah, there is an increasing need for intentionality in listening to the people and understanding their pain. Everything that Nehemiah does is based on the relationships he builds with the people who are helping rebuild Jerusalem. Nehemiah grieves with the people as he listens to their hurt, then takes the matter to God in prayer and begins to consider what resources he has at his disposal. He is careful about his timing, making sure his first actions are grounded upon the solid base of the relationships he has fostered, and based also on his own assessment of the situation.<sup>39</sup>

Only after these foundational steps toward building relationship with both God and neighbor have been accomplished does Nehemiah go public with the people as a group. He calls a big public meeting and discusses the problem with the people in front

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<sup>37</sup> Linthicum, *Transforming Power*, 43-45.

<sup>38</sup> Linthicum, *Transforming Power*, 49.

<sup>39</sup> Linthicum, *Transforming Power*, 94-99.

of the masses. Then he leads them through the process of turning the problem they are facing into an issue they can confront. The people decide what to do about the issue and how to name the issue at hand. The people create their own strategy as to how to go about working on the issue. The people work together on the project at hand, confronting the oppressive systems and eventually defeating the system that held them captive to its power. Then, the people and Nehemiah together confront the demons of Israel in their midst. Finally, they celebrate their accomplishments together.<sup>40</sup> Through the example of Nehemiah, Linthicum lays a solid foundation about one way that persons can combat the disempowerment forced on collective groups. He seeks to empower them into their strengths and celebrate as a unified people.

Global and systemic problems continue to have individual consequences as well. We all share the planet together, each one in their own societies. Yet, societies have commonalities in the struggles that humans assume within them. One such struggle is the challenge of inequality. There are many types of inequality: racial, socioeconomic, and gender to name a few. In American living, a major contributing factor to the inequality that results in disempowerment of persons is globalization that has led to an increase in capitalism which continues to drive a divisive line between the rich and the poor in our culture.

Ichiro Kawachi and Bruce Kennedy have written on the effects of this disempowerment driven by the greedy culture of our time. Regardless of the culture they studied, the results of a correlating relationship between health and income remained intact. The standard of the average citizen's wealth in a country dictated the standard of a person's health. They state, "Within societies, the lower our standing relative to others,

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<sup>40</sup> Linthicum, Transforming Power, 100-05.

the unhealthier we tend to be.”<sup>41</sup> American political and social value placed on potential upward mobility and opportunity has caused our nation and its people to suffer a great variation between the rich and poor that continues to grow. As it grows, those who find themselves at the bottom of the social ladder will increasingly find themselves not only becoming more unhealthy, but also find higher mortality rates a growing problem.<sup>42</sup>

The global problem caused by economic shifting towards capitalism and inequality has increasing personal implications. Since we are not separated from one another, the relational nature of our cultures and our global economy are becoming clearer all the time. As we try to keep up with other countries and the people within our countries try to keep up with each other, we run a race that is fraught with vanity. It is vitally important that we begin to look at ourselves as relational persons living interconnected with the peoples of the world and the planet we call our home. Kawachi and Kennedy warn

There is a social limit to building fortress communities, to sacrificing longer hours on the job, and to mortgaging our collective future on escalating consumption. Sooner or later, we are bound to reach a limit on the new prisons we can build, or the proportion of the underclass we can incarcerate. In the long run, our present behavior is unsustainable, either for the nation or for the planet. Future historians may look back on the American model of capitalism, and legitimately question what it accomplished in the way of advancing human freedoms and capabilities. Market forces, unleashed from social and political control, have a corrosive impact on social cohesion.<sup>43</sup>

Instead of trying to continue to feed this unhealthy social dynamic, Kawachi and Kennedy suggest that one needs to focus on relational themes such as obligation, caring,

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<sup>41</sup> Kawachi and Kennedy, *Health of Nations*, 58.

<sup>42</sup> Kawachi and Kennedy, *Health of Nations*, 103.

<sup>43</sup> Kawachi and Kennedy, *Health of Nations*, 199.

and reciprocity.<sup>44</sup> In this way, one can begin to change these unhealthy dynamics through personal and relational means, including involvement in politics, better self-care, and stronger relationships with others. In today's uncertain economic situation, one can clearly see the need for positive change in the global economic system. Building relationships that support balance and global economic health is a subject of increasing importance, particularly in these unstable times.

### Empowerment through Relationship

The opposite of disempowerment, loneliness, hurt, and brokenness is the empowerment found through healthy relationship with God, self, and others. Our journey is individual in experience but communal in nature. Therefore, it is of high importance that one looks always to God for guidance, works with self for growth, and helps others to promote love and justice to a hurting world.

John Wesley was a man who put strong emphasis on the importance of relationship in the Christian life. Being United Methodist and having the setting of a United Methodist congregation as the background for this project, it is appropriate to reflect on Wesley's definition of a Methodist.

A Methodist is one who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind, and with all his strength. God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul, which is continually crying, "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And there is none upon earth whom I desire besides Thee." My God and my all! "Thou art the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever." He is therefore happy in God; yea, always happy; as having in Him a well of water springing up into everlasting life, and overflowing his soul with peace and joy. Perfect love having now cast out fear, he rejoices evermore. Yea, his joy is full; and all his bones cry out, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, according

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<sup>44</sup> Kawachi and Kennedy, Health of Nations, 200.



to His abundant mercy, hath begotten me again unto a living hope of an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, reserved in heaven for me.”<sup>45</sup>

This definition may seem a bit advantageous, but Wesley strongly believed in the transformative power of the Holy Spirit in one’s life. God can take that which is broken and make it whole. God can take that which is suffering and turn it into joy. God can take one’s fear and turn it into love. Some of the ways this happens is a mystery. Yet, one way that it happens is not a mystery—through the power of loving one’s neighbor and becoming an agent of God’s love. For Wesley, this notion was plainly and succinctly phrased in his definition of Christian perfection.

It (perfection) is nothing higher and nothing lower than this—the pure love of God and man; the loving God with all our heart and soul, and our neighbor as ourselves. It is love governing the heart and life, running through all our tempers, words, and actions.<sup>46</sup>

In order to truly live the Christian life, one must have a deep and profound love of God which works in harmony with a genuine love of neighbor. Only through the combination of the two can there be the fullness of the Christian life that John Wesley would term sanctification—Christian perfection.

John Wesley put high importance on restoring the nature of genuine community through the people of the church. For Wesley, church was about being “a congregation or body of people united in the service of God.”<sup>47</sup> To think of the church as a building or institution was not enough for Wesley, as it did not place emphasis on the importance of relationship and taking one’s faith and putting it into action. One who called her or

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<sup>45</sup> John Wesley, A Plain Account of Christian Perfection (Peterborough: Epworth Press: Peterborough, 1952), 11.

<sup>46</sup> John Wesley, Plain Account of Christian Perfection, 46.

<sup>47</sup> John Wesley, “On the Church,” in John Wesley, ed. Albert Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 308.

himself Christian must be one that seeks to build the Kingdom of God in this world, doing here on earth what is done in heaven.

The way in which the church, or groups of Christians seeking to serve, was to act to build community was by living a life filled with mercy, service, and piety. One of the ways this was implemented was by the formation and regular meeting of small groups called class meetings. In these meetings, the group participants would be attentive to one another's souls by holding one another accountable for living the Christian life. This accountability was especially important in first doing no harm and then second, doing all the good one can.<sup>48</sup>

Wesley had specific things in mind with the instruction of doing no harm and doing good. These instructions help to illuminate the importance of the social nature of the Christian life and the call to live an intentional loving, giving lifestyle based on scriptural holiness.

First, by doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind; especially that which is most generally practiced. Such is taking the name of God in vain; the profaning the day of the Lord, either by doing ordinary work thereon, or by buying and selling; drunkenness, *buying or selling spirituous liquors*, or *drinking them*, unless in cases of extreme necessity; *fighting*, quarreling, brawling; going to law; returning evil for evil, or railing for railing; the *using many words* in buying or selling; the *buying or selling uncustomed goods*; the giving or taking things on usury; *uncharitable* or *unprofitable* conversation; doing to others as we would not they should do unto us; doing what we know is not for the glory of God, as the *putting on of gold or costly apparel*; the *taking such diversions* as cannot be used in the name of the Lord Jesus, the *singing* those *songs* or *reading* those *books* which do not tend to the knowledge or love of God; softness and needless self-indulgence; laying up treasures upon earth.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> John Wesley, "The Rules of the United Societies," in John Wesley, ed. Albert Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 178-79.

<sup>49</sup> Wesley, "Rules of the United Societies," 178-79.

By this listing, one can easily see the social nature of the expectations placed upon group participants. Interaction with others and the way others were treated signaled the spiritual health of the group member. Doing no harm was the first step toward building up the Kingdom of God and nurturing genuine community. However, the second step of doing good was equally important.

Secondly, by doing good, by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and as far as possible, to all men: to their bodies, of the ability which God giveth, by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick, or in prison; to their souls by instructing, reproofing, or exhorting all they have any intercourse with; trampling under foot that enthusiastic doctrine of devils, that we are not to do good unless “our heart be free to it”: by doing good especially to them that are of the household of faith, or groaning so to be; employing them, preferably to others, buying one of another, helping each other in business (and that so much the more, because the world will love its own, and them only); by all possible diligence and frugality, that the gospel be not blamed; by running with patience the race that is set before them, “denying themselves and taking up their cross daily” [cf. Lk. 9:23]; submitting to bear the reproach of Christ, to be as the filth and offscouring of the world; and looking that men should “say all manner of evil of them falsely for the Lord’s sake” [cf. Mt. 5:11].<sup>50</sup>

Wesley did not encourage seclusion or avoidance of the outside world. He believed that the whole world was his parish, knowing wherever he found himself to be was the place he must practice God’s love. Engaging with our broken world was desperately needed in Wesley’s day and it continues to be so in today’s world as well. We have the power to help heal the hurts around us, if we would each become more intentional about being in radical loving relationship with all those who are thirsting for the living waters of God’s love.

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<sup>50</sup> Wesley, “Rules of the United Societies,” 179.

### A Need for Change

Perhaps it is even more evident in this particular time in our country's history there is a great need for positive change. From the disturbing economic situation we have recently been facing to wars to poverty to lack of health care, there are many needs screaming out for help within our broken world. There are many ways that Christians might become positive agents of change in the lives of those who are downtrodden and suffering. This project seeks to find some practical ways to be able to become an intentional agent of God's love to those around us, becoming Godbearers to those in need. In the next chapter, the author will discuss ways that Christians might be able to claim the good news of healing and understand the need for evangelism through Godbearing.

## CHAPTER 3

### Evangelism through the Lens of Pastoral Care

In the previous chapter, the brokenness of self, church, and community were all described as pieces of the problems of our world and current state of affairs. Each of these three pieces is in need of healing, but one still has to build a relational understanding of evangelism in order to accomplish this task. In this chapter, the author will describe how she understands evangelism in an interconnected, interdependent reality. As illustrated throughout this paper, one must begin with self-knowledge in order to know what way one naturally engages with the world. Therefore, the author will begin with her own understanding of some of the basic elements needed to build a theology of evangelism—starting with a brief history of evangelism and moving towards a postmodern, global paradigm. From this basis, one can begin to analyze the implications for a pastoral care approach to those one is engaged with in forming Christ-like relationships. These topics will be followed by a brief statement on the author's understanding of the good news found in Jesus Christ, particularly in reference to conversion. Finally, the author will discuss how the followers of Jesus must go forward into the world to transform themselves and others through love of God and neighbor and practicing Godbearing in daily life.

#### A Brief History of Mission

Jesus said, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of

the age.”<sup>1</sup> Commonly known as “The Great Commission,” this verse has been used as the basis for evangelism in the modern era. The way it is interpreted is varied. Some have seen it as a right to conquer communities and peoples due to some great call to convert all persons to understanding faith in the way they do. There have been many abuses of people based on this interpretation. Others see this verse as a call to reach out to people in an effort to unify all believers under one banner of Christo-centric<sup>2</sup> thinking and action. For the purposes of this project, neither of these interpretations fit. The great Commission is one of developing radical relationship, helping persons to discover abundant life and healing through becoming living agents of God’s love to all persons.

Before talking about the Great Commission’s call in terms of this project, it is helpful to review ways it has been understood and discuss some of the implications of those modes of thinking. David Bosch has written one of the primary modern texts on the history of mission in the Christian faith. His discussion of Matthew’s understanding of mission, which ultimately leads to the Great Commission, is centered upon an understanding of the importance of orthopraxis.<sup>3</sup>

For Matthew, then, being a disciple means living out the teachings of Jesus, which the evangelist has recorded in great detail in his gospel. It is unthinkable to divorce the Christian life of love and justice from being a disciple. Discipleship involves a commitment to God’s reign, to justice and love, and to obedience to the entire will of God. Mission is not narrowed down to an activity of making individuals new creatures, of providing them with “blessed assurance” so that, come what may, they will be “eternally saved”. Mission involves, from the beginning and as a matter of course, making new believers sensitive to the needs of others,

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. 28:19-20, NIV.

<sup>2</sup> By Christo-centric, I am meaning those who would see the world not in its pluralistic possibilities nor in an exclusive Christianity, but those who would be more inclusivist in their approach to evangelism. In other words, inclusivists are those who would imagine the world as all one under the banner of Christ specifically, not necessarily God who for us as Christians was manifested in the person of Christ.

<sup>3</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 81.

opening their eyes and hearts to recognize injustice, suffering, oppression, and the plight of those who have fallen by the wayside.<sup>4</sup> Matthew sees discipleship and mission as indelibly linked to service to those in need, sacrifice of one's own interests to the extent that they may be in opposition to God's interests, and bringing forth the reign of justice that helps to create God's kingdom here on earth.

While this definition is a helpful one for the ways that we are developing a relational understanding of evangelism in this paper, it must be noted that other ways of looking at mission are not so clearly focused on social justice and relational uplifting of others in God's love. Historically speaking, the concepts of evangelism and mission have gone through many different phases over time. Bosch describes six paradigms of Christian mission over the history of the Christian movement based on the categories developed by Hans Küng. They are the following:

1. The apocalyptic paradigm of primitive Christianity.
2. The Hellenistic paradigm of the patristic period.
3. The medieval Roman Catholic paradigm.
4. The Protestant (Reformation) paradigm.
5. The modern Enlightenment paradigm.
6. The emerging ecumenical paradigm.<sup>5</sup>

The Matthean view espoused at the beginning of this discussion of Bosch's text is from the first period named. However, it is also helpful to briefly review some of the changes in thinking about mission during the other five periods.

Bosch describes the expansion of the church and its sense of mission during the patristic period as centered around being a model of God's love to others. In particular, there was an increasing understanding that God's love, specifically as shown through Jesus, should be shared with the greater world.

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<sup>4</sup> Bosch, Transforming Mission, 81.

<sup>5</sup> Bosch, Transforming Mission, 181-82.

In its deepest sense mission, in the Orthodox perspective, is founded on the *love of God*. If we have to identify *one* text from Scripture that epitomizes the Orthodox position on mission, it would be John 3:16, “For God so *loved* the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”. God’s love manifests itself in *kenosis*, that is, in “inner, voluntary self-denial which makes room to receive and embrace the other to whom one turns” (Voulgarakis 1965:299-301). And if God’s love, disclosed in sending Christ, is the “theological starting point” of mission (Yannoulatos 1965: 281-284; cf. Voulgarakis 1987: 357f), the same love should find expression in his emissaries; it is because they are motivated to love which, like God’s love in Christ, manifests itself in *kenosis*, that they go to those outside the Christian fold. God is not regarded primarily, as he often is in Western theology, as the righteous One who judges the sinful and unrighteous; it is his love rather than his justice that is highlighted. Because God loves humankind he wrought his plan of redemption. “God is the seeking God, looking for the lost sheep; the loving Father, awaiting the Prodigal’s return” (Stamoolis 1986:10).<sup>6</sup>

Christianity grew exponentially by blooming everywhere it was planted. Christians were living all throughout the Roman Empire and had a tremendous effect on its territories. Christianity grew because the people of Christ were acting as agents of God’s love in the world around them. They were not sequestered from their environment, but they lived within it and its customs—but in distinctively Christian ways. Their causes were love and charity. They lived them fully.<sup>7</sup>

The next period is roughly between the years of 600 and 1500 AD and is centered mainly around the growth and expansion of the Roman Catholic Church. Beginning with Constantine, there was a marriage of church and state that had not previously existed for Christians.<sup>8</sup> Once instituted, however, it would be hundreds of years before there would be a thought of separating the two. As the connection grew stronger, the Catholic Church grew in power such that politics and religion were greatly unified. Due to this unity,

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<sup>6</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 208-09.

<sup>7</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 211-12.

<sup>8</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 214.



there was an ever-growing theology of mission that was based upon Luke 14:23 which focused on acting to “compel them to come in”.<sup>9</sup>

That this mentality dominated missionary thinking for centuries is confirmed as late as the sixteenth century, when Las Casas was challenged by opponents of his gentle and non-coercive missionary approach to explain how he interpreted Luke 14:23. *Compelle intrare* (“Compel them to come in”), he responded, did not refer to force but to persuasion; the Indians should be moved by the proclamation of the word to embrace the faith, and not, proverbially speaking, at gun-point (cf. Rosenkranz 1977:184). In subsequent centuries the explicit appeal to Luke 14:23 fell into disuse, but the sentiment behind it persisted well into the twentieth century and some of its missionary encyclicals. It could not really be otherwise, as long as one argued that there was no salvation outside the formal membership of the Roman Catholic Church and that it was to people’s own eternal advantage if they could be made to join this body.<sup>10</sup>

It was the policy of the Church to compel others to believe in Christ. This policy was evidenced through the massacres of the Crusades, wars that were supported in part by Augustine’s theory of “just war”.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, it was easy to see this policy in effect during colonialism, as expansion of the territories of Europe meant expansion of the Roman Catholic Church as well. The Church took its mission of coercion to distant shores, many times forcing those who were of other faiths to choose Christ or suffer horrific consequences.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, the mentality of conquering, colonialism, and conversion, would not end with this era, as we will later see.

Although the Catholic Church put forth a strong force for unity within the Christian faith for a thousand years, eventually there rose a groundswell within Christendom of those who were looking for a more individualistic approach. Having seen the abuses of the Catholic Church, Martin Luther and others of his time began

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<sup>9</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 236.

<sup>10</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 236-37.

<sup>11</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 223.

<sup>12</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 226-27.

redefining their religious lives as less about being in the collective and more about having a personal salvation and relationship with God.<sup>13</sup> The key text for the Protestant reformers was Romans 1:16f.<sup>14</sup> There were strong emphases on justification by faith, realizing the depravity of sin in every individual and need for the salvation of Christ, personal accountability and choice to receive Christ, the centrality of Scripture, and the priesthood of all believers.<sup>15</sup> In part due to the fractured nature of the developing Protestant schools of thought, there were differing opinions as to the need for mission. Some, like Zinzendorf, “opposed the idea of “group conversions” and emphasized individual decisions”.<sup>16</sup> He and those of similar thought believed that mission was “not an activity of the church, but of Christ himself, through the Spirit”.<sup>17</sup>

Another group developing at the time, the Calvinists, had a very different understanding of mission.

For Calvin, the Christ who was exalted to God’s right hand was preeminently the *active* Christ. In a sense, Calvin subscribed to an eschatology in the process of being fulfilled. He used the term *regnum Christi* (the reign of Christ) in this respect, viewing the church as intermediary between the exalted Christ and the secular order. Such a theological point of departure could not but give rise to the idea of mission as “extending the reign of Christ”, both by the inward spiritual renewal of individuals and by transforming the face of the earth through filling it with “the knowledge of the Lord”. The relationship between these two dimensions, very inadequately dubbed the “vertical” and the “horizontal”, was to characterize much of Calvinism during all subsequent centuries and exercise a profound influence on the theory and practice of mission. In most of the early seventeenth century Second Reformation theologians—G. Voetius, J. Heurnius, W. Teellinck, and others—the two dimensions were held together in a creative tension.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 242.

<sup>14</sup> Rom. 1:16, NIV reads, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”

<sup>15</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 241-43.

<sup>16</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 253.

<sup>17</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 253.

<sup>18</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 256.

Among the Calvinists, Puritans, and others of like mind, the goal of mission was to glorify God. God was ultimately a merciful, loving God. However, for persons to live as the predestined believers they were bound by God to be, they must live in and help create theocracies. God must be the ruler of all, including local governments. Theocracy was the ideal, and its purpose was to bring others to their way of living and believing. All of this activity in mission was heavily influenced by the belief that Western Christianity was superior to all other forms of culture.<sup>19</sup> The superiority of Western thinking as a predominant Christian motif continued into our next period, the enlightenment.

During the Enlightenment, there were several significant cultural changes that affected the Church and its concept of mission. Suddenly, reason and mind were center stage. All things could be deduced with enough cognitive energy put toward it. Things no longer needed a purpose for existence. There was simply a law of cause and effect that brought all things into fruition. Problems were each considered potentially solvable if only one was given all the needed facts. Science ruled the day, as it was the only non-biased, factual source of information.<sup>20</sup> Most importantly, “a central creed of the Enlightenment...was faith in humankind.”<sup>21</sup> There was a significant increase in the belief in the power of humanity and its possibilities. Ironically, in the Christian faith, sometimes these central tenets of the Enlightenment were used in ways that may not have allowed others to reach their full humanity.

Western thinking was strong in the belief that Western ways were better than any other, and religion was no exception.

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<sup>19</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 258-60.

<sup>20</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 265-67.

<sup>21</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 267.

The *subject-object dichotomy* meant that, in admittedly very opposite ways, the Bible and, in fact, the Christian faith as such, became objectified. Liberals sovereignly placed themselves above the biblical text, extracting ethical codes from it, while fundamentalists tended to turn the Bible into a fetish and apply it mechanically to every context, particularly as regards the “Great Commission”. Each group, in its own way, celebrated the precept that each person was able to understand the Bible unaided by others. But also, representatives of both groups—because of their inveterate belief in their own “manifest destiny”—often tended to treat peoples of other cultures as objects rather than brothers and sisters.<sup>22</sup>

Western Christians believed that their brand of Christianity was a cure-all for all the world’s ills.<sup>23</sup> They believed that Christianity could bring the world to a higher and more righteous standard of living, lived out in practice in everything from more Christian colonialism to the motives behind fighting World War I.<sup>24</sup> The Enlightenment was the open door to individual choice and responsibility for one’s own thinking about God and faith, but it radically changed some assumptions that society had about religion. As opposed to previous paradigm shifts, “what distinguishes our culture from all cultures that have preceded it, then, is that it is, in its public philosophy, atheist”.<sup>25</sup> It was no longer acceptable to believe that faith was assumed or that Church was required. The Enlightenment changed everything.

Now that the world was being seen differently, there needed to be a new approach to mission as well. Rather than being the church that is taking over and unifying the world through colonialism and coercion, in the postmodern era one needs to have a different understanding of church and mission. “Church cannot be viewed as the *ground* of mission, it cannot be considered the *goal* of mission either – certainly not the *only*

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<sup>22</sup> Bosch, Transforming Mission, 342.

<sup>23</sup> Bosch, Transforming Mission, 343.

<sup>24</sup> Bosch, Transforming Mission, 343.

<sup>25</sup> Bosch, Transforming Mission, 268.

goal.”<sup>26</sup> Mission has to be seen not exclusively of the church, but of God and “God’s turning to the world”.<sup>27</sup>

Mission is *missio Dei*, which seeks to subsume into itself the *missiones ecclesiae*, the missionary programs of the church. It is not the church which “undertakes” mission; it is the *missio Dei* which constitutes the church. The mission of the church needs constantly to be renewed and re-conceived. Mission is not competition with other religions, not a conversion activity, not expanding the faith, not building up the kingdom of God; neither is it social, economic, or political activity. And yet, there is merit in all these projects. So, the church’s concern *is* conversion, church growth, the reign of God, economy, society and politics – but in a different manner! (cf. Kohler 1974: 472). The *missio Dei* purifies the church. It sets it under the cross – the only place where it is ever safe. The cross is the place of humiliation and judgment, but it is also the place of refreshment and new birth (cf. Neill 1960: 223). As community of the cross the church then constitutes the fellowship of the kingdom, not just “church members”; as community of the exodus, not as a “religious institution”, it invites people to the feast without end (Moltmann 1977: 75).

Looked at from this perspective mission is, quite simply, the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus (Hering 1980: 78), wagering on a future that verifiable experience seems to belie. It is the good news of God’s love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world.<sup>28</sup>

Bosch’s definition of mission needed today, as illustrated above, puts strong emphasis on the need for ecumenism as well. Bosch chastises those who would put denominationalism or exclusivism ahead of church unity-in-mission.<sup>29</sup> He stresses that in this new era of mission it is imperative that churches work together to promote the cause of the cosmic Christ within the world. The Christian church should be working together to bring forth the reign of God into the world and to do otherwise is nothing less than a

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<sup>26</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 377.

<sup>27</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 376.

<sup>28</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 519.

<sup>29</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 466.

sin.<sup>30</sup> The church does not have to be uniform to be united, but in its diversity it must unite under the banner of Christ<sup>31</sup> through repentance and recognition that the needs of the world today may be fundamentally different than seen in generations prior.<sup>32</sup>

At this point, it is helpful to also look to Bosch for a clarification of the difference between evangelism and mission. These two terms can be used interchangeably, but do not need to be. And, perhaps it is not always best if these terms are used interchangeably due to some misconceptions that it could naturally lead one toward. Evangelism, for all practical purposes, can be seen as a subset of the church's mission. Bosch explains,

As far as the noun is concerned, it is worth noting that the Protestant evangelical movement as well as Roman Catholics appear to prefer "evangelization", whereas Protestant ecumenical's favor "evangelism". I shall use "evangelism", to refer to (a) the activities involved in spreading the gospel (however we may wish to define these...), or (b) theological reflection on these activities. "Evangelization" will be used to refer to (a) the process of spreading the gospel, or (b) the extent to which it has been spread (for instance in the expression "the evangelization of the world has not yet been completed") (cf. also Barrett 1982: 826; 1987: 25f; Watson 1983b:7).<sup>33</sup> ...

In awareness of the essentially preliminary nature of our evangelistic ministry, yet at the same time conscious of the inescapable necessity to be involved in this ministry, we may, then, summarize evangelism as that dimension and activity of the church's mission which, by word and deed and in the light of particular conditions and a particular context, offers every person and community, everywhere, a valid opportunity to be directly challenged to a radical reorientation of their lives, a reorientation which involves such things as deliverance from slavery to the world and its powers; embracing Christ as Savior and Lord; becoming a living member of his community, the church; being enlisted into his service of reconciliation, peace, and justice on earth; and being committed to God's purpose of placing all things under the rule of Christ.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Bosch, Transforming Mission, 467.

<sup>31</sup> Bosch, Transforming Mission, 465.

<sup>32</sup> Bosch, Transforming Mission, 366.

<sup>33</sup> Bosch, Transforming Mission, 409.

<sup>34</sup> Bosch, Transforming Mission, 420.

Certainly, Bosch's definition is quite inclusive of most of the goals of the Christian life. Therefore, the author also concurs with the general feeling of this definition, albeit with an eye not only to ecumenism, but also to the global perspective of our day and the need for genuine interreligious dialogue and shared mission as well.

### The Broader Context of a Global Perspective

Bosch is not the only Christian author whose thrust in Christian mission is more ecumenically oriented than interfaith-connected in scope. Perhaps one of the more quoted of those who support an exclusively Christian understanding of evangelism and mission is William Abraham. In terms of summarizing Abraham's oft-referenced book, The Logic of Evangelism,<sup>35</sup> the author is inclined to agree with the critique given by Elaine Robinson. She writes,

His (Abraham's) approach will not arrest the decline occurring in the contemporary church for four main reasons: 1) it posits the white, male, middle-class perspective as universal; 2) it uses scripture selectively; 3) it defines evangelism—an indisputably ambiguous term—in ways that promote the status quo rather than challenging it; and 4) it displays triumphalist tendencies. These features of evangelism, taken together, stand in opposition to the radically relational reality of God in Christ in the Holy Spirit and can serve to stifle renewal.<sup>36</sup>

Abraham's text, while an interesting read of cookie-cutter evangelistic program, lacks an inherent openness to the other. It continues in the model found so often in the Enlightenment-models of superiority-styled thinking and Western-based inclusion of the rest of the world into "our" exclusive club of Christianity.

In contrast to the view of exclusivism, Christians must realize the global context of the world and the new way that Christians must seek to relate to it and within it. The

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<sup>35</sup> William J. Abraham, The Logic of Evangelism (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989).

<sup>36</sup> Robinson, Godbearing, 44.

world has changed greatly within the past century and one can hardly imagine how many more connections will be established between nations, cultures, and persons in the next few years or decades.

It would be foolhardy to try to predict the direction Christian mission will go in the next generation. We can, however, make several observations as to the terms and conditions with which we will be working. (1) The ideal relationship for the world Christian community is one of interdependence with a recognized system for shared decision-making and resource allocation. Until that is resolved there will continue to be tensions and resource imbalances. (2) The churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America presently demonstrate greater vitality and growing missionary commitment, but they tend to be resource poor. This suggests the ecclesial – rather than cross-cultural – strategy will predominate over the next couple of decades. (3) The experience of the suffering church since World War I holds important insights concerning the role of the Holy Spirit in the mission of the church and a missionary ecclesiology. Gleaning such insights is foundational to a theologically informed missiology.<sup>37</sup>

Christian nations and cultures are living in a world that is becoming more and more interdependent. Globalization has interlinked the world's economy in very powerful ways, as we have recently seen evidenced by the global stock crises and recession. The internet has made the far corners of the world as close as the touch of a computer button.

Technological changes in communication and travel have brought the pluralism of the world's cultures and religions into contemporary consciousness. No longer can one so easily assume a universality to one's own worldview. The relativism first introduced by thinkers such as Einstein, and then radicalized by the social critiques of liberation movements, has been further radicalized by a crowded world where cultures and religions different from one's own are no longer across the world, but across the street.

In such a context, even when we strive to repeat the thought patterns of a previous age, we must do so against the counterforce of the contemporary milieu. It is as if we view the world as a kaleidoscope, filled with shapes

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<sup>37</sup> Wilbert R. Shenk, "Mission Strategies," in Toward the Twenty-First Century in Christian Mission, ed. James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 231.



and colors that can be described in terms of a particular pattern. But then someone turns the kaleidoscope, and not only do all of the pieces shift, but it even seems that some new ones have been added. There is familiarity and some continuity, for the colors are still there—but their tones seem somehow different in the altered positions, and while at first we try to see them in their familiar form, we nevertheless find ourselves struggling to express the difference in the way of seeing. Finally we must recognize the newness of the pattern, and we reach toward a familiarity with the new that can be as assuring as that which we remember—or project—as belonging to the old. But the kaleidoscope will never repeat exactly the same pattern. Darwin, Marx, Freud, Einstein, social movements, and technological changes have all turned the kaleidoscope of our world, changing the configurations of what we call reality.<sup>38</sup>

In this new world context, how does Christianity become interconnected in such a way as to promote the cause of Christ while being at the same time humble about its role as a part of a diverse, multi-religious world?

An obvious starting place for Christian mission and evangelism is through appreciation of diversity and genuine interfaith dialogue. In the most liberal, and quite likely overly idealistic, of worlds, John Hick's vision for the pluralistic future of Christianity's dialogue with other religions may be possible, but not likely. His hope that the major religious traditions would "while continuing to be distinctively different, will each gradually winnow out the aspect which entails its own unique superiority"<sup>39</sup> seems highly improbable. Yet, that those religions might "increasingly influence one another in interfaith dialogue, with some degree of mutual transformation in which each enriches and is enriched by the others"<sup>40</sup> seems a more workable goal. To this end, it becomes necessary to understand how one might be both decidedly Christian *and* be able to deeply value differences and God's presence in and through those of other faiths.

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<sup>38</sup> Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, God, Christ, Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology, new rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 3-4.

<sup>39</sup> John Hick, A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 123.

<sup>40</sup> Hick, Christian Theology of Religions, 123.

Marjorie Suchocki accesses her understanding of process theology in order to describe the need for Christians to appreciate and engage in interfaith dialogue. She begins by explaining that the nature of God as described by Christians—Trinitarian—describes God by using an example of irreducible diversity and complex unity.<sup>41</sup> She continues her explanation of the reason for interreligious dialogue from this juncture.

The diversity within the church is one form of the image of God, but it remains to be completed by a deeper mode of diversity in community, and this is affirmation of religious pluralism. If “trinity” bespeaks irreducible differences, then surely religions themselves are irreducibly different. It is not the case that we are “all saying the same thing,” or even that we all “worship the same God.” Buddhists are a case in point; many forms of Buddhism do not worship any God. We are irreducibly diverse.

In the Christian notion of the Trinity, diversity is eternal. To model the Trinity throughout all of humanity, then, implies that each tradition must remain true to itself, essentially unlike the others, even as it continues its living development. We are called to become community together not by negotiating our differences, suppressing our differences, or by converting from our differences, but in and through our differences. We are called to become a community of diverse communities.<sup>42</sup>

In Suchocki’s understanding, a genuine appreciation of the other for who they are, without having the intention to either convert or be converted may be a key to peace. Treating others from different cultures as friends and fellow children of God may yet avert another one of the many religious wars and hostilities that history has repeatedly shown brings nothing but mass suffering.<sup>43</sup> The call to peace is a solidly Christian call and lifestyle as evidenced by the following text:

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<sup>41</sup> Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, Divinity and Diversity: A Christian Affirmation of Religious Pluralism (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 67.

<sup>42</sup> Suchocki, Divinity and Diversity, 69.

<sup>43</sup> Suchocki, Divinity and Diversity, 81.

## Ephesians 2 (NIV)

14For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, 16and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. 17He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

19Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, 20built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Rather than coercive tactics and warring madness, Christ himself advocates peace with his life, death, and resurrection. We do not have to fear others who may be alien to us, but we can know that we are citizens of God's world together. God will use all of us to God's glory in ways unimaginable to us, but ways that we can learn if only we will be open to them. We must strive to listen and learn, not merely talk and teach. There is room and time for both, if we come to the table of interreligious dialogue, in our private lives or in more structured groups, as friends.

Entering into a relation of friendship with those from other religions or faith systems does not mean that one has to blindly follow a different path than the path of Christ. As one realizes that God is present through all things, one can begin to be open to learning many new things that the Spirit can teach. "Being a Christian is not a fixed condition. It involves openness to the Spirit and that is also openness to wisdom

wherever it may be found.’’<sup>44</sup> One can stand firmly within the Christian tradition while still being open to being transformed through learning from others. John Cobb explains,

I am making a claim to Christian superiority. It is not a claim that Christians are better people than others, or that Christian history has made a more positive contribution to the planet than have other traditions, or that Christian institutions are superior. The claim is only that a tradition in which Jesus Christ is the center has in principle no need for exclusive boundaries, that it can be open to transformation by what it learns from others, that it can move forward to become a community of faith that is informed by the whole of human history, that its theology can become truly global.<sup>45</sup>

This openness to transformation does not deny the Christian tradition, but embraces it in a profoundly devoted and sincere way. Christian tradition has grown and changed in its embodiment on earth throughout the centuries. And it needs to be engaged intentionally with the world around it today as well.

Let me put the matter strongly. If being a Christian means unqualified affirmation of any form Christianity has ever taken, I cannot be a Christian. But in fact such an affirmation would not be Christian at all. It would be idolatrous and faithless. It would be absolutizing the relative and refusing to attend to the call of the living Christ. But to give complete devotion to the living Christ—as Christ calls us in each moment to be transformed by the new possibilities given by God for that moment—that is not idolatrous or faithless. That is what Christianity is all about.

In faithfulness to Christ I must be open to others. When I recognize in those others something of worth and importance that I have not derived from my own tradition, I must be ready to learn even if that threatens my present beliefs. I cannot predetermine what the content of that learning will be or preestablish categories within which to appropriate it. I cannot predetermine that there are some beliefs or habits of mind which I will safeguard at all costs. I cannot even know that, when I have learned what I have to learn here and been transformed by it, I will still see faithfulness to Christ as my calling. I cannot predetermine that I will be a Christian at all. That is what I mean by full openness. In faithfulness to Christ I must be prepared to give up even faithfulness to Christ. If that is where I am

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<sup>44</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr., Transforming Christianity and the World: A Way beyond Absolutism and Relativism (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 151.

<sup>45</sup> Cobb, Transforming Christianity and the World, 73.

led, to remain a Christian would be to become an idolater in the name of Christ. That would be blasphemy.<sup>46</sup>

This may sound like an overly strong approach to interfaith dialogue and learning, but the point of genuine openness to the quality of sharing with others is clearly made.

In the Christian life, we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves. In truth, this admonition to love is often referred to as “the Greatest Commandment”.

Mark 12 NIV

#### The Greatest Commandment

28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

32 "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 33 To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

34 When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

If we are to be devoted to Christ with our whole heart, we must be willing to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. In part this means that we must learn to listen to their thoughts with the same intensity that we would want others to listen to us. “Love requires that we take others seriously, and that now requires us to listen to what they have

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<sup>46</sup> Cobb, Transforming Christianity and the World, 45-46.

to say.”<sup>47</sup> Then, after listening, if we are called to do so, we may speak from the heart with love.

Listening is not only hearing about who we have been from the perspective of others. It is also learning from them what they have come to understand through their quite different histories. This need not be painful. It can be exciting. Ideas and possibilities are brought to our attention to which we had heretofore been blind. In short we can learn not only in the sense of gaining information, but in the more important sense of having our horizons extended and our consciousness raised. Again, we accept only what we as Christians perceive as true wisdom. But there will be much of that. And the Christian perspective from which we learn will change as we learn.

Love that takes the others seriously will not only listen, repent, and learn. It will also speak. When we have listened, repented, and learned, we will know much better what we have to offer. We can then speak the truth in love responsibly. As we have listened from our Christian perspectives, we will not only have learned wisdom, we will also have noticed gaps and omissions. Sometimes we will perceive dangers in the emphases and ideas that are presented to us. Sometimes we will find that those who rightly criticize us do not notice similar weaknesses and failures in their own positions. If we have been shaped in ways for which we are grateful in our own tradition, we will want to explain this to others.<sup>48</sup>

Through learning how to genuinely listen, we are able to better show the love Christ calls us to share with others. By repenting of our own selfishness in perspective and closed-mindedness, we open ourselves to being present and active in working with the Holy Spirit moving among us. It is only through genuine relationship and love that true discipleship for ourselves in following Christ is possible, not to mention the discipleship of others.

Discipleship is a term often used, but not as often emphasized in day-to-day living of the Christian life. The church has promoted discipleship as a means to get into the

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<sup>47</sup> Cobb, Transforming Christianity and the World, 153.

<sup>48</sup> Cobb, Transforming Christianity and the World, 153.

doors of the church and a ticket to the pearly gates, but not always as a call to a change in lifestyle both personal and communal.

Here lies a fundamental problem. The church has allowed itself to believe that making disciples is merely a quantitative task, *i.e.*, a numerical enterprise. It has assumed that the easier it makes it to follow Jesus, the more it adapts the gospel to the cultural situation, the more people will be able to be discipled. That false assumption has dominated not only the church's evangelistic practice, but also its way of conceiving the Christian life—so that the way *to* Christ has been softened the life *in* Christ has been watered down. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this “cheap grace.” Rene Padilla has labeled it “culture-Christianity.” Juan Luis Segundo has likened it to the massification of society. ...

The problem with this form of Christianity, which characterizes in one way or another the majority of churches and Christians in the USA, is not just the powerful influence it has had on the traditional “mission fields” around the world—how it has inhibited the gospel from taking root among those who have been evangelized. Even more important is what this “way of life” has done to the gospel itself—reducing it to “a conscience-soothing Jesus, with an unscandalous cross; an other-worldly kingdom; a private, inwardly, individualistically limited Holy Spirit; a pocket God; a spiritualized Bible” and a church that escapes from the gut issues of society. It has conceived the goal of the gospel as “a happy comfortable and successful life, obtainable through the forgiveness of an abstract sinfulness by faith in an unhistorical Christ.” It has made possible “the conversion of men and women without having to make any drastic changes in their lifestyles and worldviews,” guaranteeing thereby “the preservation of the status quo and the immobility of the people of God.”

True Christian discipleship cannot be equated with such a distorted gospel. Such a gospel can make only proselytes, false and spurious Christians, not true disciples of Jesus. The true disciple follows Jesus to the cross and is not ashamed to “bear the abuse he endured” (Heb 13:13). Nor is he or she motivated by the vision of a “successful life.” Rather the true disciple is moved by the desire to be a good and faithful servant to the kingdom.<sup>49</sup>

The true disciple has a focus on the imminent God, not merely the transcendent being who may be portrayed as offering through Christ a sort of one-way ticket to eternal glory.

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<sup>49</sup> Orlando E. Costas, The Integrity of Mission: The Inner Life and Outreach of the Church (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1979), 16-18.

One cannot be a Christian who is living as a disciple in this world without working to bring the kingdom of God into fruition through transformation of hurt and suffering into wholeness and joy.

Suffering is part of the human condition and of sharing life together with others who are hurting in this world. "Suffering is worthy of the human being when it is for the sake of a just cause. A cause is just when it seeks justice for the exploited, when it pursues the rights of the exploited against the legality of a distorted civil order, against the tenacity of an imposed system."<sup>50</sup> The cause of Christ is about reaching out to those on the margins, the persons who are outside the gate of the accepted and the privileged.

Jesus died outside the gate, and in so doing changed the place of salvation and clarified the meaning of mission. No longer can I see God's saving grace as an individual benefit, a privileged possession, or a religious whitewash that enables me to feel good and continue to live the old way because my bad conscience has been soothed and my guilt feelings washed away. On the contrary, because salvation is to be found in the crucified Son of God who died outside the gate of the religious compound, to be saved by faith in him is to experience a radical transformation that makes me a "debtor" to the world (Rom. 1:14) and calls me forth to share in his suffering by serving, especially its lowest representatives: the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed. Nor am I allowed to use the cause of evangelism to build ecclesial compounds that insulate Christians from the basic issues of life and impede them to follow through in their calling to take up the cross, deny themselves, and follow Jesus through the crossroads of life.<sup>51</sup>

When the disciples of Christ are acting in the path of following Jesus, the world becomes a more just, more loving place. For the Spirit is always calling towards the good for all God's children. "It is the Spirit who opens up horizons that block the human spirit, who breaks the bonds holding back the process of liberation of the oppressed, who keeps alive

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<sup>50</sup> Leonardo Boff, Passion of Christ, Passion of the World: The Facts, Their Interpretation, and Their Meaning Yesterday and Today, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 122.

<sup>51</sup> Orlando E. Costas, Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), 194.



hope and the utopic vision of a world free from dominations and ruled by justice and a spirit of community.”<sup>52</sup> The Holy Spirit is constantly moving in ways that inspire change for the better. “The Spirit is creativity and the spirit of innovation in a group, but never in an individualistic sense or for self-advancement, always for strengthening the community in working to fulfill its needs.”<sup>53</sup> When the disciples of Christ are focused on this work of the Spirit, then true church growth, the growth not in mere numbers but in purpose and call, becomes possible. *“Church growth is that holistic expansion which can be expected spontaneously from the everyday action of the church functioning as a redemptive community.”*<sup>54</sup>

When we become one in Christ as disciples, we are promised that the Holy Spirit will guide us to be able to see God’s love in a new way, being truly one in Christ and one with each other.

John 14 (NIV)

15 “If you love me, you will obey what I command. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever— 17 the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. 18 I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. 19 Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. 21 Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.”

We can see God’s love by sharing in the Spirit’s work of loving our neighbor and bringing the kingdom of God into fruition here and now. As justice, mercy, compassion,

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<sup>52</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 194.

<sup>53</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 195.

<sup>54</sup> Orlando E. Costas, *The Church and Its Mission: A Shattering Critique from the Third World* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1974), 89.

and understanding grow, disciples of Christ get to participate in God's redemptive work in the world. All of this begins with love of God and neighbor, becoming Godbearers of grace in Jesus' name. We must know our history, its pitfalls and triumphs. However, we must begin to intentionally work for good and God's will for love in this world, in this particular time, in this particular place with all the openness and kindness that our hearts can offer.

### Pastoral Care Implications of Evangelism Doctrines and Key Terms

As this discussion turns to how one can listen to and love one's neighbor, it is necessary to discuss some of the pastoral care considerations which come into play when building genuine discipling listening relationships. Due to concern for brevity, this section will not cover all possible pastoral care implications for each of these theological concepts. My goal is to concentrate the remarks to relevant points concerning the connections between some major Christian doctrines expressed during discussion of evangelism and mission and their pastoral care concerns for persons. The major terms that will be illuminated will be the following: repentance, forgiveness, sin, grace, and atonement.

Repentance is based upon the understanding that the way to repent means one is changing perspective and view on the world. One is turning from the evil to the good, from the darkness or hurt to the light. It is not based upon the understanding that one is inherently worthless and evil, needing to recognize one's despondency in order to achieve the ability to come towards the light of God's love and grace. The contrasting views are well illustrated in the following quote.

Where the word is taken from the Greek, *metanoia*, repentance emphasizes the positive. It speaks of new direction. It relates to a "repointing".

Where the word is taken from the Latin, *penitentia*, repentance emphasizes the negative. It then speaks of what must be done to redeem or satisfy the sin of failure.<sup>55</sup>

When focusing on the Greek understanding of the word, one can support the inherent value of the individual. Rather than focusing on all that is negative in a person, *metanoia* recognizes a person's ability to choose positively and act, with self-worth, toward the good. In pastoral care, it can be incredibly destructive of self-worth, growth, and the process of self-actualization to imply that one is in one's core, worthless and unable to do anything but fail on one's own. At the same time, when speaking of repentance as *metanoia*, it is important to remind persons that one is not alone, but God loves and cares about them. With God's help, not only can persons make good decisions, but also are then able to recognize and follow the path more clearly of the good and not evil as they draw closer to the Holy Spirit, following the example of Jesus as disciples.

Forgiveness is one of the greatest keys towards reaching for wholeness in one's life and healing in one's soul. To know one is forgiven and also to be able to forgive others is a difficult, yet essential task for the pastoral caregiver to implement in his/her own life and help others to do the same. In the Hebrew, forgiveness is defined by the word *shalach*. In the Greek, it is *aphiemi*. Both terms denote removing, remitting, lifting up, or sending away things in one's past that may be stumbling blocks to living fully in the present.<sup>56</sup> Persons have difficulty at times finding themselves worthy of forgiveness by God, others, or even themselves. However, forgiveness, which is more than mere acceptance, comes as a result of a repentant heart.

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<sup>55</sup> James G. Emerson, "Repentance and Confession," in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. Rodney J. Hunter (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 1072.

<sup>56</sup> Brian H. Childs, "Forgiveness," in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. Rodney J. Hunter (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 438.

When forgiveness is made real in any of these three relationships, God and self, self and others, self and self, there is the hope of both transformation and reconciliation. Persons are no longer trapped in the inevitable consequences of their actions and doomed to walk the long dark road of remorse forever. Forgiveness empowers them to stop the pattern, start a new path, and work towards restoring relationship with the one who was wronged.<sup>57</sup> Forgiveness is central to the restoration of right relationship and the transformation towards the good for self and others. Forgiveness empowers persons to not only take responsibility for their actions, but then to go forth from the moment of forgiveness to make a positive difference in the lives of those around them, many times through the process of reconciliation. The moving from a process of unilateral forgiveness where one person frees the offender with forgiveness to mutual forgiveness where both parties are able to creatively renegotiate the relationship is critical to growth.<sup>58</sup> The pastoral caregiver can be a key presence to enable these steps to occur.

Sin is an incredibly destructive force in human life and relationships. Both individually and communally, the problems of sin take their toll on others and creation. The anxieties caused by fear for primary needs being met, greed and aggressiveness that are part of the instinctual survival nature of humans, and the need for safety are only a few of the psychological needs which cause people to be tempted towards sin.<sup>59</sup> There are several therapeutic dimensions to consider. Three of these dimensions which are prominent are the ontological, psychopathological, and theological dimensions.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> David W. Augsburger, Helping People Forgive (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 9.

<sup>58</sup> Augsburger, Helping People Forgive, 15.

<sup>59</sup> Edward Farley, "Sin/Sins," in Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, ed. Rodney J. Hunter (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 1175.

<sup>60</sup> Farley, "Sin/Sins," Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 1176.

In the ontological dimension, which deals with our physical realities as humans, conditions such as grieving and loss, the embodied challenges of our lives, and fear of dying are all concerns to be considered in counseling.<sup>61</sup> The psychopathological dimension involves the unhealthy mental responses to life situations. These unhealthy responses can stem from a variety of causes. Some of these causes are trauma in childhood or family of origin, neurochemical imbalances, or experiencing victimization from an event or a system of oppression.<sup>62</sup> The theological dimension challenges pastoral caregivers to reconsider the traditional Judeo-Christian theology of sin and reframe such a theology in ways that take the human psycho-social element into deeper consideration. The restructuring of such a theology would look at environmental factors which contribute to the processes of sinful action, consideration of anthropological factors that promote sinful behaviors both historically and sociologically, and consideration of the distinctions between psychological guilt and theological perspectives on sin and guilt.<sup>63</sup>

One definition of grace that fits the traditional Christian thought is “the unconditional, comprehensive, empowering love of God for the world.”<sup>64</sup> Grace is expressed in history in various forms, none more central than through Jesus Christ. Through the forgiveness of our sins and the divine power that seeks to redeem and restore a broken humanity, grace shines in the darkness of the world to promote hope for a brighter tomorrow.<sup>65</sup> There are relationships within the understanding of grace that create various perspectives on the role of grace in human life. These relationships are not

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<sup>61</sup> Farley, “Sin/Sins,” Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 1176.

<sup>62</sup> Farley, “Sin/Sins,” Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 1176.

<sup>63</sup> Farley, “Sin/Sins,” Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 1176.

<sup>64</sup> Rodney J. Hunter, “Grace and Pastoral Care,” in Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, ed. Rodney J. Hunter (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 468.

<sup>65</sup> Hunter, “Grace and Pastoral Care,” Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 468.

independent of one another, but tend to work in varying degrees to lesser or greater value depending on the emphasis or need.<sup>66</sup>

One dynamic that is noteworthy is the difference between grace seen as forgiveness or grace as the method for empowerment. Within this dynamic are the differing emphases to a greater or lesser value regarding justification and sanctification. Those who are based more strongly in an understanding of grace seen as forgiveness and as a means for justification will naturally gravitate toward a less progressive-growth centered model which might emphasize human development. These persons would more likely appreciate a model that gives gratitude for the awesome forgiveness of God, deepening their understanding of sin and moving them towards a life of thankfulness.<sup>67</sup>

In contrast to this view, other models of understanding grace may lean toward the claim of grace as method of empowerment. In these models, more emphasis is given to the human power of choice and the hope for human potential. Howard Clinebell's growth counseling is one example that focuses on the need for growth and responsibility for moral and ethical decisions which support nurture of self, community, and environment into a richer expression of grace. Jungian and humanistic psychologies also support models that see grace as empowerment.<sup>68</sup>

Another relationship to consider as one relates grace to pastoral care is whether grace is more imminent or transcendent. Sacramental theology as well as counseling approaches that center on the need for a pastoral counselor to mediate one's healing support more transcendent understandings of grace. Transcendent grace is understood to

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<sup>66</sup> Hunter, "Grace and Pastoral Care," Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 468.

<sup>67</sup> Hunter, "Grace and Pastoral Care," Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 468.

<sup>68</sup> Hunter, "Grace and Pastoral Care," Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 468.

be given through elements external to the person. Certain elements of ritual such as death rites and worship services also support the transcendental expression of grace.

Grace in its more imminent form is found through the human equation for self-improvement. Grace is not seen as something which is external and “over there,” but is understood to be an internal process where grace and self meet in existential ways. Traditional orthodoxy is less supportive of the human internalization of grace in self-affirming ways. This is evidenced by the triumph of Augustinian theology supportive of human worthlessness without the external grace of God as compared to the Pelagian view of humans as persons with the capacity to make decisions for right moral choice with God’s grace as helper in the process.<sup>69</sup>

Another relationship within the understanding of grace is how grace finds us in everyday life. Grace can be either institutionalized or charismatically experienced. Again, sacramental and worship rituals of the church tend to institutionalize such grace. Many skilled pastoral care approaches that may require training to practice also tend to require the institutionalization of how God’s grace acts within the world. However, there are many instances within the Bible and throughout human experience that demonstrate God’s grace also working through more charismatic ways. The gifted pastor who intuitively and fills relationships with grace, spiritual healers, and those who are considered spiritual masters are all examples of charismatic grace breaking forth into the world in creative ways.<sup>70</sup>

A final dynamic to consider in the relationship between pastoral care and grace is the tradition’s understanding of grace in history as contrasted with the grace present in all

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<sup>69</sup> Hunter, “Grace and Pastoral Care,” Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 469.

<sup>70</sup> Hunter, “Grace and Pastoral Care,” Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 469.

of nature. Historically, the Christian tradition emphasizes grace regarding human redemption. Yet, it is also scripturally appropriate to include the assertion that God's grace is for all of creation as well. Psycho-spiritual approaches to health that include integration of environment and dynamics outside the person emphasize grace as present in all of nature. Approaches that center only on the human individual model for self-improvement and change independent of external dynamics are more consistent with grace in traditional Christian individualistic understandings.<sup>71</sup>

At the risk of reiterating a previous point, these dynamics are not independent or exclusive of one another. The pastoral caregiver must keep in balance each of these areas with the process that is most healthy for the individual and community s/he serves in ministry. There is much wisdom to be gleaned from the balancing of various understandings of grace as both forgiving and empowering, both transcendent and imminent, both institutional and charismatic, and found in both historical and natural contexts. The attentive pastoral counselor will be able to not only find this balance in her/his own understanding of grace, but also lead others to find a balance in their understanding of grace as well.

There are several differing understandings of atonement that also need to be reviewed by those seeking to be in relationship with persons in need of pastoral care. One way that persons may understand the meaning of atonement through Christ is substitutionary atonement. In this theory of atonement, Christ is seen as taking on the sufferings of the cross in our place. This view of Christ's sacrifice illustrates a God

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<sup>71</sup> Hunter, "Grace and Pastoral Care," Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 470.



image that is interested in requirement and punishment.<sup>72</sup> In this theological stance, the person counseled must be helped to confront their own sinfulness, “but it will wish to do so in such a way that the “No” of God’s judgment is always enclosed within the redemptive “Yes” of salvation.”<sup>73</sup>

A second way to understand atonement is found in a less public, more personal approach. Atonement in this view sees Christ as “offering a work of penance” through his death on the cross.<sup>74</sup> Persons with this theology of atonement are apt to see the suffering of Christ as an act of personal devotion, even going so far as to try and share those sufferings through a very physical understanding of the sacraments. Those who espouse this view may find great comfort in the appropriate use of the sacraments as healing elements used in pastoral care.<sup>75</sup>

Another way that atonement is seen by persons is through a more spiritualistic vein. There are those persons who believe there is spiritual warfare taking place within the universe. This warfare is between the evil spirits or demons and the good spirits or angels. Yet, the most powerful mark of victory in this battle is the death and resurrection of Jesus. Christ has the unique triumph of “winning the victory over the powers of darkness and death.”<sup>76</sup> Due to the strong understanding in this theology of the battle between good and evil spirits, pastoral care “must always retain a certain dimension of

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<sup>72</sup> Walter J. Lowe, “Christology and Pastoral Care,” in The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, ed. Rodney J. Hunter (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 157.

<sup>73</sup> Lowe, “Christology and Pastoral Care,” The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 157.

<sup>74</sup> Lowe, “Christology and Pastoral Care,” The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 157.

<sup>75</sup> Lowe, “Christology and Pastoral Care,” The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 157.

<sup>76</sup> Lowe, “Christology and Pastoral Care,” The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 157.

exorcism: which is to say that it must at one and the same time take seriously the powers of evil and refuse to bargain with them.”<sup>77</sup>

Atonement can also be understood as a way that “Christ’s work is one of exercising a moral influence.”<sup>78</sup> Beginning with Anselm, this explanation of atonement is one that sees the most important thing about Christ’s sacrifice is that it is performed as an act of love. This approach seeks to encourage transformation within Christians to become more loving and thereby find redemption.<sup>79</sup> In this theology of atonement, there is more emphasis on the exceptional moral character of the pastoral counselor. “Pastoral care thus becomes primarily an effort to encourage and inspire, to model and persuade.”<sup>80</sup> It is this type of atonement that best fits into the model of evangelism this paper is built upon.

### The Good News of Healing

The word *evangel* means literally “good news.” However, what one considers the good news is incredibly important in determining how one will share the good news—evangelize. Evangelization which focuses on the despondent and worthless condition of the human soul focuses on the negative within a person. It does not spur one forth to use God-given gifts in tandem with the Spirit for positive change, but rather—at best—prayerfully begs a merciful God to save one from one’s evil self.

Jesus said “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”<sup>81</sup> Some translations use “life in all its fullness” rather than “abundance.” The author is aware that, in modern American society, it may be helpful to consider the phrase “life in all its

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<sup>77</sup> Lowe, “Christology and Pastoral Care,” The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 157.

<sup>78</sup> Lowe, “Christology and Pastoral Care,” The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 157.

<sup>79</sup> Lowe, “Christology and Pastoral Care,” The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 157.

<sup>80</sup> Lowe, “Christology and Pastoral Care,” The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, 157.

<sup>81</sup> John 10:10b, NRSV.

fullness” rather than “abundance” due to the fact that so many in our society equate the latter with accumulation of material goods and wealth. Yet, for the purposes of this section, the terms will be used interchangeably.

The good news is that Jesus has reconnected humanity with God through himself by reconciling human hearts and minds to God. Jesus came to remind us of God’s love, justice, and mercy. Jesus came to model the way of righteousness, right living, which is to live the abundant life. Not only this, but Jesus lived, both before and after his death, the resurrected life. He was not dead in any part of himself, either before or after his physical crucifixion. He is the example of humanity most fully alive. Along the way, he also resurrected others and modeled for persons, especially his disciples, how to use the power God gives through the Holy Spirit to heal and help persons to grow closer to what God has created them to be.

The good news is that salvation does occur, and Jesus is the one who has brought it forth into the world. Salvation, from the Latin word *salve*, “To heal,” is the basis for Jesus’ ministry, during his physical life as well as through his eternal resurrection. Jesus sent the disciples out to heal others,<sup>82</sup> the apostles after Jesus’ resurrection continued to heal,<sup>83</sup> and the good news is that even today, the Holy Spirit still works for salvation—healing—through the modern-day disciples of Jesus. The Holy Spirit works as a transformative agent that can heal one’s deepest wounds, give joy that rises above life’s circumstances, and grant peace in the midst of all of life’s great trials. The transformation that occurs is nothing less than conversion.

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<sup>82</sup> Luke 10:8-9, NRSV, “Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you, *cure the sick who are there and say to them ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’*” (emphasis mine).

<sup>83</sup> Acts 3:6, NRSV (Peter heals the crippled beggar), “I have no silver or gold, but what I have, I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.”

One can hardly understand the depth and breadth of the gospel without contemplating and affirming Christian conversion. Many persons have written about conversion over the centuries, giving voice to the countless numbers who have been blessed to experience it. However, in modern evangelism, persons who have written on the subject of conversion are careful to connect the importance of the divine initiative and the human response. The focus, from a greater or lesser degree, of these modern authors is to connect the experience of conversion with the need to go forth and spread the good news. It is to this discussion of conversion and spreading of the good news that we now turn.

Conversion is tightly connected with repentance. Some authors connect these words as interchangeable terms, while others state that repentance is what will lead to a person's conversion. Yet, these terms are inseparably linked in Christian thought. Unless one is willing to acknowledge that God's help is necessary, particularly in the power and message evidenced through Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection, there will be no movement towards a conversion experience. Persons who believe they have no need of God, that they are entirely self-sufficient and can gain nothing from God's help, or who do not see that sin is a reality in the world and their own sin is part of the problem hurting themselves and others will not move toward repentance, to say nothing of a movement toward conversion.

In the writings of George E. Morris regarding Christian conversion, he makes the argument that in both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, the Biblical terms for conversion, *shubh* in Hebrew and *epistrephein* or *metanoien* in the Greek, connote repentance is the centerpiece of conversion. He uses several other authors to illustrate the

point that Christian conversion is God's leading action, along with the human response, that helps people to turn from sinful actions toward God. Morris emphasizes this turning towards God is not for only a moment, but is a total redirection and reorientation of the way one lives. He contrasts his argument for reorientation of lifestyle against a reductionist view of repentance that states to repent is to merely change one's mind. Morris' understanding of conversion requires not only a change in thinking, but also a change in action. The change in one's action would then affect not only one's personal life, but also communal interactions and relationships as well.<sup>84</sup>

In Morris' discussion of salvation and the good news, he describes the gospel as "the good news of God's unique breakthrough to humanity."<sup>85</sup> In this point, Morris is describing the unique breakthrough as being the person of Jesus. Morris confirms God's creative power from the beginning through creation ex nihilo, and then moves to a claim that Jesus is the Word of God that continues to create from nothing, calling forth the human soul to respond. He claims that the gospel has the authority and power to bring a response regardless of the adeptness of the person who tries to communicate the word. Instead of any human adeptness, the Holy Spirit speaks through the proclamation of the gospel to the hearts of those who hear.<sup>86</sup>

A slightly different understanding of conversion, repentance, and sharing of the gospel is found in the work of Walter Klaiber. Klaiber contrasts the pre-Jesus Jewish concept of conversion with the conversion ideas taught by Jesus. The Jewish concept of conversion was one of penance that urged one to daily remember to turn back toward

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<sup>84</sup> George E. Morris, The Mystery and Meaning of Christian Conversion, rev. ed. (Nashville; Port Orford: World Methodist Evangelism Press, 2004), 62-66.

<sup>85</sup> Morris, Mystery and Meaning of Christian Conversion, 91.

<sup>86</sup> Morris, Mystery and Meaning of Christian Conversion, 89-90.

God. Only by complete turning from one's former path of sin and radically changing course back to the obedience to the law of Moses could one be saved. This style of conversion was implemented in John the Baptist's ministry, and Jesus affirmed it insofar as he was willing to be baptized by John. However, Klaiber reminds us that regardless of Jesus' willingness to accept John's baptism, this understanding of conversion did not drive his future ministry without some degree of alteration in Jesus' concept of conversion.<sup>87</sup>

Conversion in Jesus' teaching, according to Klaiber, is one of accepting Jesus' radical message of unconditional love and acceptance. Rather than finding one's way back to a law-centered life through penance and repentance that requires some form of human dedication and action, Klaiber states that Jesus' audacious claim was that all that was required was the willingness to be found and accept the love and forgiveness of a seeking God. Using the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son and his brother from Luke 15, Klaiber illustrates how Jesus understood the abundant love of God for humanity. Any who are lost and then found are celebrated over in joyous ways, inviting others to also celebrate the finding of the one who was lost. The only action that is required from the human for this celebration to occur is to be willing to be found! Then, knowing one is forgiven, accepted, and loved as he/she is, one may then be able to live from that forgiveness.<sup>88</sup> Jesus modeled this acceptance repeatedly in his own ministry by intentionally eating with sinners, forgiving sins, and healing lives through a ministry of modeling God's extravagant love to those who were hurting from both self-condemnation and societal condemnation as well. Jesus accepted those who were unable

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<sup>87</sup> Klaiber, Call and Response, 142.

<sup>88</sup> Klaiber, Call and Response, 143-44.

to be included in God's grace by society in any other way. He said repeatedly how welcome they were at God's table and how happy God was to heal them of their hurts and their sins. Through Jesus' ministry, persons were able to realize they were already at the table of God's love, all they needed to do was recognize it – that was conversion. Then, later it was up to them whether they wanted to pick up the fork and eat!

For Klaiber, there is a distinct difference between Jesus' call to salvation and a call to discipleship. God saves persons based on God's love and acceptance of those who are lost and then allow themselves to be found. Then, God may grant the gifts of repentance and discipleship. The disciple is one who is "a living example told about what it means to allow oneself to be determined by the proximity of the reign of God."<sup>89</sup> These followers of Jesus are walking examples of the hope for the bringing about of the Kingdom of God in the world. They are the healers and lovers of a hurting and broken world, doing it all in the name of Jesus. Klaiber expresses this concept well in his statement about evangelism:

Evangelism befitting the gospel is evangelism in service of this invitation. It relieves those of whom too much is demanded. It liberates the captive. It heals the sick and worn down and gives new courage to those who have failed. But it does that not on its own authority, but rather in the name of Jesus. "Naming the name" is the most important function of evangelism in the context of the integral mission of the church.<sup>90</sup>

Disciples of Christ are those who live in order to accept and strengthen others, even as Christ first accepted and loved them. They transform the world through radical compassion, and strengthen their own hope and faith in the process.

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<sup>89</sup> Klaiber, *Call and Response*, 145.

<sup>90</sup> Klaiber, *Call and Response*, 48.

Albert Outler also had a great deal to write regarding the subject of evangelism from a Wesleyan perspective. Outler scorned those who promoted salvation as a process of going through a certain number of steps in a formulaic presentation of how to gain God's favor. Instead, he called for a return to Wesleyan principles of love in action that has both depth and quality. Outler states, "The authentic evangelical has what John Wesley commended as a "catholic spirit"—an openness of heart and mind that cherishes diversity within the larger unity of essential faith and commitment."<sup>91</sup> Outler denies any inference from John Wesley's writings to the complete and utter depravity of humanity. Instead, Outler espouses,

Human life is meaning fully related to God even in sin and estrangement; the sinner has some dim, imperfect knowledge of God in his fleeting moments of transcendental or mystical awareness; his moral conscience is deadened but not destroyed.<sup>92</sup>

The Holy Spirit is already working in the person long before anyone shares with her/him the concepts of the gospel message. God's work of the Holy Spirit, which Wesley refers to as prevenient grace, is engaged with persons from their first moments. The Holy Spirit is the one who invites persons into an intimate knowledge of God's grace and the dynamic energy that sustains the community of faith, the church, in its mission of sharing grace and love with the world through the establishment of the Kingdom of God here on earth. Through repentance, conversion (the hearing of faith), and obedience, persons are nurtured into a lifelong growth process surrounded by a supportive family of fellow Christians.<sup>93</sup> Through this fellowship, one learns about how to evangelize. That

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<sup>91</sup> Outler, Evangelism and Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit, 28.

<sup>92</sup> Outler, Evangelism and Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit, 33.

<sup>93</sup> Outler, Evangelism and Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit, 35.



is, how to embody “communication of the gospel and the maturation of Christians in the community of the church and in the human community at large.”<sup>94</sup>

In my own understanding of conversion, parts of each of these authors’ writings are applicable. Walter Klaiber’s expression of Jesus’ message as one of incredible acceptance and love is pivotal to understanding the awesomeness of the love of God in human life. Combining Klaiber’s views of acceptance with Outler’s reminder of the role of the Holy Spirit, prevenient grace, and the lack of utter depravity of the individual, there is no reason from a pastoral care perspective why persons who have not yet come into the Christian life need be condemned and ostracized in any way. Each person is a unique individual who already has some relationship with the Holy Spirit, whether they are consciously aware of it or not. The role of the disciple who is spreading the good news is to help the person birth into the world the great potential God has for their life by accepting his/her place at God’s table, picking up their fork, enjoying the feast, and then working to help others realize the same.

In the process of conversion, Christians who are sharing the good news of healing and wholeness must remember they are helping persons respond to the grace already at work in their lives through the action of the Holy Spirit. A criticism that I have of many evangelism strategies is the emphasis on the Christian as proclaimer of Jesus by sharing relevant Scripture passages only. When this is prominently a theme, the person may be standing on street corners or handing out pamphlets. Some might agree that the Scripture speaks for itself and therefore sharing words in this way is one method of moving persons toward conversion, or worse – an action that publicly shows one is “not

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<sup>94</sup> Outler, Evangelism and Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit, 16.

ashamed of the gospel.” However, in my understanding of the gospel as healing and of the Holy Spirit as divine agent of the good news, this method is quite inappropriate and rarely effective. As seen earlier in this chapter, the gospel is something to be lived out in genuine discipleship, not preached only as a superior way of thinking and ticket to a heavenly afterlife.

Relationship is required for midwifery of the gospel in another human being. Not only this, but I believe the gospel, a message of healing, wholeness, restoration, and reconciliation, to be best brought forth not by persuasion or coercion through talking. Instead, disciples must be taught the skills for effective listening. God is already at work and moving persons toward relationship with God’s self. There is little purpose in our talking, but every purpose in our listening. By listening, disciples become the model of a listening God who cares and values the person who sits in front of them. As persons cry out their needs and hurts, struggle through their questions and challenges, and name their hopes and dreams, the creation of Christian community begins with the disciple of Christ who values the person’s own spiritual journey. The disciple who is tuned into listening to God’s voice in his/her own heart and within conversation with another, attentive to his/her own struggles and potential transference issues that may help or hinder another’s growth, and one who is equipped to truly listen to the other person in a way that empowers the other to move from darkness and questions to light and joy – this disciple is doing the work of an evangelist! The Holy Spirit is already working, it is our job as Christians to help the person open her/himself to allowing the Spirit to speak in more powerful ways, changing hearts and minds, and leading them down the path Jesus has already begun to mark for them to follow—the path to the abundant life.

The Kingdom of God: Transformation of Self and World to Wholeness

H. Richard Niebuhr named the central goal or mission of the church as “the increase among men (humans) of the love of God and neighbor.”<sup>95</sup> As the background of all the church does, these two things are pivotal for Niebuhr. They are inseparable concepts that are supported by the history of the Judao-Christian movement, seen in both the Mosaic law and the new covenant Jesus offers in the New Testament.<sup>96</sup> Niebuhr accentuates definitions of the love of humans reconciled to God and then what it means to love one’s neighbor.

According to Niebuhr, we are to be thankful for all God has done for humanity, vis-à-vis us, through loving God. He describes the nature of the love we are to share as follows:

Reconciliation to God is reconciliation to life itself; love to the Creator is love of being, rejoicing in existence, in its source, totality and particularity. Love to God is more than that, however...It is loyalty to the idea of God when the actuality of God is a mystery; it is the affirmation of a universe and the devoted will to maintain a universal community at whatever cost to the self. It is the patriotism of the universal commonwealth of justice and love, the reality of which is sure to become evident. There is in such love of God a will-to-believe as the will-to-be-loyal to everything God and his kingdom stand for. Love to God is a conviction that there is faithfulness at the heart of things: unity, reason, form and meaning in the plurality of being. It is the accompanying will to maintain or assert that unity despite all appearances.<sup>97</sup>

When we become more concerned about religion and politics or power than we do about our loving reconciliation to God, the love we are meant to have toward the divine gets distorted and persons idolatrously elevate human loyalty above their loyalty to God.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry: Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1956), 31.

<sup>96</sup> Niebuhr, Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, 33.

<sup>97</sup> Niebuhr, Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, 37.

<sup>98</sup> Niebuhr, Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, 37.

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Regarding love of neighbor, Niebuhr states the neighbor mentioned should be defined in a very broad sense. For those who are our neighbor include all persons regardless of rank, power, race, or station. Those who we are meant to love may be considered the socially elite or the socially oppressed. For Christ can be seen in all people through the image of the son of God present in their lives, both individual lives and in community. Neighbors can be seen not only in humans, however, but also in the greater realm of being. Everything that is, whether animate or inanimate, temporal or eternal, all that exists is that which participates in love. Humans are to love those neighbors in human forms, and in all creation as well.<sup>99</sup>

Niebuhr gives striking, broad-ranging definitions of the love of humans for God and the love of humans for one another. He also makes the point that love of self, neighbor, and God are all inextricably related.<sup>100</sup> Jesus also declares the interrelationship between these three necessary components of the healthy spiritual life in all three synoptic texts. As the Great Commandment has been previously discussed, let us review what Mark writes,

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your

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<sup>98</sup> Niebuhr, Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, 37.

<sup>99</sup> Niebuhr, Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, 38.

<sup>100</sup> Niebuhr, Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, 34.

neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.”<sup>101</sup>

Neibuhr is correct in enumerating what it means to love God and neighbor. However, what is not included in his series of definitions is a working definition of love of self. According to the scripture we are to love neighbors as we love ourselves. Therefore, a working definition of self-love which affirms Christian values of self-worth, uniqueness, and creativity given as gifts from God is necessary. Without such a definition, there is the risk of either thinking of one’s self as something of a “little God,” selfishly seeking pleasure and greed throughout one’s existence, or thinking of one’s self as not ever enough, focusing only on the deprivation and worthlessness of the human condition without ever fully acknowledging one’s self as part of God’s workmanship who creates individuals and communities of individuals for a greater purpose.

Now the question that lies before us is “What kind of evangelism supports love of God, self, and neighbor?” Considering what we have already learned about the good news of healing and the importance of conversion, let us now work towards a formulation for building up the kingdom of God by love of God, neighbor, and self.

### Godbearing

A recent addition to the current evangelistic literature is the concept of Godbearing as illustrated by Elaine Robinson. She describes a definition of evangelism, which she calls Godbearing, that focuses on relationship as primary to the Christian life. She states, “Godbearing can be understood as the revolutionary, subversive power of grace forming the Christ character within us and overflowing into the world in radically

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<sup>101</sup> Mark 12:28-31, NRSV.

relational ways.”<sup>102</sup> Her understanding of evangelism is built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ being the prototypical Godbearer.<sup>103</sup> Yet she also uses several Biblical examples and historical figures to point out that persons who profess to following God’s path for their lives by becoming disciples of Christ must also live in radically relational ways.<sup>104</sup> Her focus is not merely on the death and resurrection of Jesus. She spends most of her time discussing the importance of the way Jesus spent his life modeling radical relationship. She espouses, “The good news begins not with the claim that Christ died for us, but with the incredible message that God lived for us!...The cross of death is the human way; the incarnation and resurrection of life is the way of the divine.”<sup>105</sup> Her affirmation of the importance of how we live as Christians is one that correlates very well with the author’s own understanding of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Robinson expounds at some length on the topic of living the life abundant by becoming agents of God’s overflowing grace to all of creation.<sup>106</sup> She is adamant about the importance of turning away from the temptations of accomplishing worldly success in order to be open to God’s grace transforming one’s heart and life. The transformation that she describes would move one away from self-centeredness and toward recognizing the brokenness of creation and the importance of using our energy to promote healing in the midst of the suffering around us. One must be willing to reach out to others even when it requires great personal sacrifice in order to heal the hurting and restore the

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<sup>102</sup> Robinson, *Godbearing*, 150.

<sup>103</sup> Robinson, *Godbearing*, 76.

<sup>104</sup> Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Paul, Bartolomé de las Casas, and Rosa Parks are the primary examples that Robinson discusses.

<sup>105</sup> Robinson, *Godbearing*, 66-67.

<sup>106</sup> Robinson, *Godbearing*, 78-79.

beauty of all creation.<sup>107</sup> One who is seeking to become a Godbearer must express “openness, otherness, service, restoration, and mutuality.”<sup>108</sup> Persons who are Godbearers must be non-judgmental advocates of God’s love that “does not insist upon its own way, even when rising up in prophetic boldness, model(ing) wholeness and resist(ing) the language of comparatives and superlatives.”<sup>109</sup>

Robinson’s Godbearing lifestyle is threefold and consists of “1) bearing God or bearing the renewed image of God within, 2) bearing witness or bearing faithful witness to God, and 3) bearing suffering or bearing with Christ the world’s suffering.”<sup>110</sup> Through living these three precepts, one can see the transformation of “ordinary people whose lives become extraordinary through their openness to God.”<sup>111</sup> The practice of Godbearing is not beyond the scope of the individual. It is the fulfillment of what it means to be human. She states, “We are called to enter into the fullness of our humanity, but we are not called to become Jesus. In other words, each of us is called to become the person who we were created to be by God.”<sup>112</sup>

Individual responsibility and social action combine to help form the progressive reality of becoming a Godbearer. For Robinson, the Godbearing life is a process that continues to transform one’s heart, life, and actions not just in one moment but throughout the course of one’s life.<sup>113</sup> Her understanding of conversion is not a one-time event, but a life-long process of becoming who God has called one to be. She explains

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<sup>107</sup> Robinson, *Godbearing*, 78-81.

<sup>108</sup> Robinson, *Godbearing*, 82.

<sup>109</sup> Robinson, *Godbearing*, 82.

<sup>110</sup> Robinson, *Godbearing*, 84.

<sup>111</sup> Robinson, *Godbearing*, 84.

<sup>112</sup> Robinson, *Godbearing*, 86.

<sup>113</sup> In Wesleyan theology, this is akin to the process of sanctification.

But life in God demands that we open ourselves to transformation across time and space; we agree to be pruned in preparation for new growth to occur. For many Christians, “conversion” is a singular event to which we can point as we remember a moment of movement from brokenness to life, from turning inward to turning outward. In a sense, conversion as a one-time event points toward fulfillment, arrival, homecoming rather than the beginning of a long journey. Thus to speak of a conversion experience in the singular is misleading and, in reality, even riskier than the discomfort of change, since when we resist transformation, we also reject the possibility of becoming fully human in the midst of radical relationship.<sup>114</sup>

Conversion is a process of becoming fully human through learning how to share God’s love to other people in the midst of their brokenness, suffering, and struggle. The reality of conversion is that it is about growing in learning how to give and receive love in healthy ways and make an interrelated world more healthy and whole through the experience.<sup>115</sup>

The process of healing for self and the world is through Godbearing. Bringing forth the reign of God on earth through loving our neighbor, restoring justice, living compassion and mercy, and walking with those who are suffering and in need are all ways that we can work with the Spirit to heal our sin-sick, God-loved world. Through following the Spirit’s lead to become disciples of Christ with our whole lives, we can build genuine, open relationships with our neighbors and our world in ways relevant to today’s needs. Through listening and truly seeking to understand the feelings and situations of those around us we can become a bridge of God’s grace between life as it is and life as it should be when lived in Christ’s love. It is up to us to focus our lives on becoming Godbearers and building those relationships which are so desperately needed to heal and redeem broken hearts and lives all around us.

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<sup>114</sup> Robinson, Godbearing, 146.

<sup>115</sup> Robinson, Godbearing, 147.



In order to build these radical relationships based on the love of Jesus that reaches out to a hurting world, there need to be practical tools that will help persons to build confidence in their own relationship with God, self, and neighbor. This project seeks to teach a small group of people how to be in relationship with God through centering prayer, build a clearer understanding of self through spiritual autobiography, and develop the skills of empathic listening so that persons may be in richer relationship with others around them. In the next chapter, these topics will be explained in greater depth in order to build a foundation for the implementation of the group project at hand.

## CHAPTER 4

### Wholeness and Empowerment through Listening Practices

Building on a knowledge of Godbearing as discussed in the previous chapter, this chapter will illustrate some practical teachings that would help to create a growth group designed to help people develop the skills of listening to God, self, and other. Using the principles developed for growth groups as defined by Howard Clinebell, a foundation will be laid to build a group that will be conducive to strong support, nurture, and growth-oriented life learning. With the increased use of listening skills, the author hopes that persons will begin to feel more empowered to reach out using evangelism as Godbearers to those around them. Through first listening to God, one is connected to the ground of all being in order to be more at one with the movement of God already at work in the world. Then by listening to oneself, a greater knowledge of one's own strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and successes will increase self-esteem and competence in faith-sharing. Finally, in learning basic principles of empathetic listening, persons will be able to reach out effectively to help heal the suffering souls in a hurting world.

#### Howard Clinebell Growth Groups

Howard Clinebell's work in pastoral care and counseling has had a strong emphasis on wellness, wholeness, and spirituality. In one of his later books, he defines his approach to counseling in the following statement:

Wholeness counseling is a spiritually empowered approach to the healing and helping processes that defines the goal as facilitating the maximum development of a person's potentialities, at each life stage, in ways that contribute to the growth of others as well, and to the development of a

society in which all persons will have an opportunity to use their full potentialities.<sup>1</sup>

Clinebell emphasizes in his techniques that health is not merely the absence of illness, but also the intentional striving towards positive growth leading to wholeness. He sees persons as living creations that have yet to find their potential to be something more than they already are. Through his work, he has tried to develop ways for persons to be able to unlock their potential and feel empowered to work toward their own growth and help others to grow as well.<sup>2</sup>

Clinebell's approach outlines seven key areas for growth which are pivotal to accomplishing one's wholeness goals. The first two center on internal work, including enlivening one's mind and revitalizing one's body. The final five each have relational elements that require a person to reach outside of one's self. These five dimensions are renewing relationships, growth in relation to the biosphere, growth in work and play, growth in relation to organizations and institutions, and spiritual growth. One is not to work on these dimensions independently of the others. All seven of these factors are interdependent and intertwined with one another. It is necessary to look at each one in relation to the whole and work towards growth in all areas simultaneously, so as to provide a greater cumulative growth effect.<sup>3</sup>

The wholeness counseling that Clinebell espouses as central has several distinctive characteristics, many of which are not present in traditional therapies. The main goal of wholeness counseling is to help persons realize their potential by actualizing their emerging gifts and graces into reality. Rather than focusing on illness or pathology,

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Clinebell, Counseling for Spiritually Empowered Wholeness: A Hope-Centered Approach (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Clinebell, Counseling for Spiritually Empowered Wholeness, 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> Clinebell, Counseling for Spiritually Empowered Wholeness, 3-21.

the wholeness-centered counselor focuses on strengths and abilities. First, the counselor sees potential in a person, and then leads the person to be able to see the potential within themselves, claiming it as their own and growing from the experience. Basing his theory partly on the belief that all things have a need to grow, Clinebell's work directs persons toward hope. This hope then creates energy that helps a person to begin to change their situations for the better, becoming intentional about doing so in creative ways.<sup>4</sup>

Clinebell also includes a formula for growth that transforms what might normally be considered negative inputs into positive action. His formula is "GROWTH = CARING + CONFRONTATION".<sup>5</sup> Caring includes therapeutic techniques that are seen as loving or affirming of the person. For example, acceptance, affirmation, and grace are all methods of caring. Confrontation embodies pastoral care techniques that help illuminate areas that may be otherwise ignored by other approaches. The only confrontation that Clinebell emphasizes as effective and therapeutic is that which leads the person to confront themselves. The balance between caring and confrontation is important because too much of either results in neither being an effective counseling tool.<sup>6</sup>

Clinebell does not see the hope of growth-centered counseling without challenge by life and the world situation. Recognizing life's difficulties, he understands that persons are constantly wrestling with the realities of various crises. In spite of this dilemma, these crisis moments are those times where one can sometimes have moments of great growth. Persons are forced by the crisis to learn new ways to cope and to activate different potentials than they ever needed to before. Even in these difficult trials, the need

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<sup>4</sup> Clinebell, Counseling for Spiritually Empowered Wholeness, 25-34.

<sup>5</sup> Clinebell, Counseling for Spiritually Empowered Wholeness, 36.

<sup>6</sup> Clinebell, Counseling for Spiritually Empowered Wholeness, 36-37.

for growth is still present. The growth in trials is not limited to personal crisis, but also takes into account the reality of evil and pathologies which strain a person's ability to reach his or her own potential. With all the evil that is realized in the world constantly, a growth-centered approach for change must center on how all these negatives can be seen in the context of hope for change. It is not only ourselves that we are trying to transform into something better, but it is the world and its pain as well.<sup>7</sup>

The individual who is to experience growth must realize they do not grow alone. Relational and external forces, working in tandem with each other, help to stimulate growth in the individual and their communities. Along with growth-centered counseling, it is also recommended that education become an investment. For one cannot grow without learning something, and Clinebell states that education and counseling go naturally together.<sup>8</sup> In addition, it is also effective to work in groups rather than to simply work alone. These "mutual growth networks" Clinebell espouses are collections of people growing with one another who are experiencing similar challenges in their lives. Alcoholics Anonymous would be an example of such a group. Yet another example of a group that would assist in sustaining the individual's growth through relationships are "human wholeness centers."<sup>9</sup> Centers that are naturally found in everyday communities could work together to become promoters of human wholeness. Health care institutions, churches and synagogues, schools, and counseling agencies could each take a role in promoting wholeness within the community by stretching their work to include growth-oriented programs. These programs might include workshops, training events, crisis

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<sup>7</sup> Clinebell, Counseling for Spiritually Empowered Wholeness, 37-41.

<sup>8</sup> Clinebell, Counseling for Spiritually Empowered Wholeness, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Clinebell, Counseling for Spiritually Empowered Wholeness, 46.

support groups, seminars, retreats, and self-help groups.<sup>10</sup> However, the focus of all of these groups needs to remember to accentuate the importance of promoting health rather than simply eradicating disease.

It is also extremely important to remember as a counselor or any leader helping to promote another's growth that one cannot heal another without first examining and healing oneself. There are none who are beyond the capacity to continue to grow. The wise counselor will always be working on their own potentialities while they are encouraging their clients to do likewise. The process of growth is liberating first for the counselor who is practicing growth-centeredness in her/his own life. Then, the counselor will also model growth for the person who is being counseled.<sup>11</sup>

In relation to ministers in particular, Clinebell writes of several stumbling blocks to growth which must be addressed by clergy before they can be guides for the wellness of others. Among these challenges are emotional stressors, including deprivation during their childhood, the multiple events that happen in ministry which threaten clergy self-worth, the danger of special privileges given by society that may separate the clergy person from society and cause arrogance, chronic loneliness, constant moves and disruptions in clergy family life, the danger felt in having doubts (especially those ministers in conservative theological churches), restrictions on personal time and recreation, problems with authority and hierarchical systems, and spiritual emptiness.<sup>12</sup> Without taking each one of these into account and working towards health in all areas, the clergy person would not be able to act as a growth-centered counselor for others. Clergy

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<sup>10</sup> Clinebell, Counseling for Spiritually Empowered Wholeness, 46.

<sup>11</sup> Clinebell, Counseling for Spiritually Empowered Wholeness, 50.

<sup>12</sup> Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., Mental Health Through Christian Community: The Local Church's Ministry of Growth and Healing (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), 266-70.

well-being is not an easy task, but one that is necessary in order to be able to serve as person-centered growth leaders within the congregations they serve.

Clinebell expresses in an early text that “religion can be a constructive, creative, healing, life-affirming force or a dark, repressive, life-crippling force.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, in tandem with the healthy minister who promotes growth, it is also important to have a view of religion which is conducive to a healing and life-affirming process. Religion that builds bridges in relationships between persons, engenders an attitude of basic trust, increases freedom and personal responsibility, moves persons from guilt to forgiveness, increases the joy of living, constructively handles both aggressiveness and sexual activities, helps with the acceptance of reality, promotes love over fear, decreases anxiety through its object of devotion, encourages relationship with the unconscious self, transforms dysfunctional societal patterns, and increases self-esteem is a life-affirming approach that increases the possibility of reaching one’s potentialities.<sup>14</sup> Religion, so practiced, will cease to represent a model of life-crippling force and become a constructive and life-affirming force. In fact, the very mission of the church is to birth within persons a greater love for God and for others. Only when religion remains proactive towards its attitudes about wholeness in health, both individually and in society, will the church be able to effectively transform the problems caused by the agony and sorrow of health’s absence.<sup>15</sup>

As the leader of a congregation, it is the clergyperson’s role to work in connection with the laity to lead the church toward greater emphasis on health and wellness.

Clinebell selects nine points that are particularly important in the minister’s role regarding

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<sup>13</sup> Clinebell, Mental Health Through Christian Community, 28.

<sup>14</sup> Clinebell, Mental Health Through Christian Community, 54.

<sup>15</sup> Clinebell, Mental Health Through Christian Community, 19-22.

wellness, particularly as it relates to mental health. While this list is written for the area of mental well-being, certainly the concepts enumerated are also applicable to spiritual and physical areas as well, as is evidenced in his later works. The points are listed as follows:

1. Inform and motivate his<sup>16</sup> congregation with regard to both mental illness and positive mental health.
2. Select and train a small group to become mental health leaders and infiltrators within the church and community.
3. Initiate action.
4. Present the Christian message in a growth-stimulating way.
5. Encourage the development of a growth-oriented program of Christian education by personally helping to motivate and train healthy persons as teachers.
6. Guide the development of a variety of creative groups including a network of small, family-modeled nurture groups.
7. Support persons in crisis and counsel with the disturbed.
8. Help to instill “unconditional positive regard” for persons into all the administrative procedures of the church, so that the total organism of the church can become an instrument for mental health.
9. Function as a community mental health leavener.<sup>17</sup>

By applying these concepts to the local church ministry, the clergyperson can lead the church in grounded and realistic ways toward the realization of a growth-centered network of ministry through the church that leads to wholeness.

One of the best ways to begin this process is to form a growth group. Growth groups are small groups formed with an intentionality towards developing the potentialities of its members. Groups may be affirmed as growth groups which have three main characteristics. These characteristics are

1. A dominant purpose (though not exclusive) is the personal growth of participants—emotionally, interpersonally, intellectually, and spiritually.
2. A growth-facilitating style of leadership is used—first by the designated leader and gradually by the entire group so that the group itself becomes an instrument of growth.
3. The growth-orientation is the guiding perspective; the emphasis is more on the unused potential, here-

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<sup>16</sup> Written in the mid 1960s, this Clinebell text illustrates that most of the clergy at the time were men. In later works, he also speaks of the importance of the role of women clergy and feminist theology. For the purposes of this paper, please assume “his” in this writing is inclusive of both genders.

<sup>17</sup> Clinebell, Mental Health Through Christian Community, 264-65.



and-now effectiveness in living, and future goals—than on past failures, problems, and pathology.<sup>18</sup>

Along with these qualities, it is also recommended that groups be composed of non-pathological members who are trying to become more healthy than they currently are. Small groups of five to seven members are preferred. The connections between sharing of feelings and content are thoughtfully balanced to create the appropriate environment for learning. Practicing applied learning to situations that are outside of the small group is encouraged. Feelings, behavior, relationships, and attitudes are all venues reviewed for potential constructive changes.<sup>19</sup> It is also assumed during the formation of a growth group that persons impulsively seek to develop his/her potentialities. The qualities of a person's relationship with others and with self increases or blocks her/his ability to grow. Therefore, small group settings increase the intensity of relationships and also challenge persons to be able to look at themselves and their relationship with others.<sup>20</sup>

The way the group is created is pivotal to its success. In addition to the group being a small group of five to seven members, plus a leader, it is also wise to have determined the length, time, and place the group will meet. Times need to be within reason for the type of group and its participants in order to promote participation. Also, places that are both private and comfortable will assist in decreasing the barriers that block sharing within the group. When inviting members to join the group, Clinebell recommends starting with healthy, mature persons with appreciable self-esteem that are ready to grow in functional relationships and a process that will increase vitality and use

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<sup>18</sup> Clinebell, Growth Groups, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Clinebell, Growth Groups, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Clinebell, Growth Groups, 7-8.

of his/her inner talents.<sup>21</sup> Starting off slowly and recognizing the need to create trust within the group, the leader will open up the early discussions to hearing from persons about their hopes and fears regarding the work of the small group sessions. Then, the small group will proceed to venture through five stages of growth: attempting to establish connections with the group and testing the boundaries, a honeymoon phase, increase in frustration along with questioning of leadership, the deepening of trust and exploration of risk, work in the group that is most effective, and finally, closing of the group.<sup>22</sup>

The leader of the small group must have a well-developed sense of growth counseling in order to be maximally effective. Especially in the first stages of the growth group, the leader sets the tone for depth of sharing, leading by example. As the leader takes on different risks and challenges, the group is likely to follow suit. Attentive to both the individuals in the group as well as the collective whole, the leader must constantly guide the group to begin to help one another to grow together, accepting responsibility for confrontation and caring as part of each of their responsibilities and not only the leader's. The leader that is focused on growth is "best described as "maieutic"...from the Greek *maieuomu* (to serve as midwife)."<sup>23</sup> As the group grows in depth and sharing, allowing other members to lead in the discussions, the original leader will be able to also become an active participant in the group. By leading and participating in multiple groups over the course of time, the leader will continue to develop his/her skills and abilities, maintaining an enlivened perspective through healthy relationships and enlivening others in the process.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Clinebell, Growth Groups, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Clinebell, Growth Groups, 32.

<sup>23</sup> Clinebell, Growth Groups, 41.

<sup>24</sup> Clinebell, Growth Groups, 41-42, 56.

### The Art of Listening

In my first year of seminary, I went down to San Diego for a Christian women's conference led by Anne Graham Lotz. Having read all week about Luther, Calvin, and the early history of the Christian church, I was in need of a diversion and a different perspective. So, I decided to go down to the conference to get back to my "roots" and hear a little bit of theology that was more like what I grew up with in South Alabama. Unfortunately, it was not long before I began to pay more attention to the words in the songs up on the screen than the music. Due to this fact, I found myself unable to sing most of them due to a lack of theological depth. So, I sat in my seat and munched on my nachos that I had picked up for lunch from the vendor just outside the convention center floor.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, there was a lady who was behind me that had paid attention to my lack of enthusiasm and felt moved to come up to me after Anne had finished speaking and the session had ended. She had obviously formed her own judgment about my lack of participation and felt she needed to share her opinions regarding the importance of a relationship with Jesus Christ. Without even asking about me or my relationship with God or Jesus, she proceeded to try to lead me to salvation right there in the midst of the convention center. A little taken aback, but also quite interested in this passionate and unsolicited plea, I proceeded to listen to her tell about the importance of a relationship with Jesus and the need for me to avoid hell at all costs. After about ten to fifteen minutes of unbroken monologue from this obviously well-meaning, albeit somewhat misguided lady, I was allowed the opportunity to reply.

Once I finally had the opportunity to talk, I tenderly explained to her that I was, in fact, a Christian and was even someone who was currently in seminary working my way

towards becoming a pastor. As she fervently had poured out her soul, I did not tell her what I was thinking. Instead, I said what I thought she needed to hear, because she was obviously more inclined toward finding peace within her own understanding of theology and situation at hand than helping me deal with any potential things that I might need to speak of. I got to say approximately two sentences about seminary, ministry, and my being a follower of Jesus. Then, she interrupted with a plethora of compliments as to how important being in ministry was and how she was so proud that I was doing such a good work for the Lord.

Later, when I had opportunity to reflect upon the conversation, I realized with increasing clarity the importance of listening. For this lady, it seemed to make all the difference in the world that I listened to her and allowed her to express her feelings about her faith. Yet, the other side of the equation was completely out of balance. Of the twenty minutes or so that we were engaged with one another, I hardly got to talk for three minutes of that time. She was literally imposing her values on me, not helping me to come to a greater realization of where God was leading me. In order to help me, she would have had to come with a listening heart, not a talking head. Without even knowing it, her actions were adamantly working against the very thing that she was trying so hard to accomplish—leading someone into a greater knowledge of Christ.

I do not believe that my experience is in any way unique, except perhaps that I did take the time to actually listen to her pontifications rather than simply trying to get away. I was trying to be pastoral and also curious as to what all this woman would end up saying to me, a total stranger, in the midst of her attempts to share her faith. Even then, I had a strong interest in evangelism, listening, and the importance of faith-sharing behaviors. If I had been someone who did not have these interests, however, I am fairly

certain the conversation would have ended much more quickly with almost assured negative results. The importance of listening in faith-sharing and midwifery of the gospel cannot be overstated. I believe listening is the key to building relationship and relationship the key to birthing with a person the abundant life and healing that God so willingly and graciously offers through following the path of Jesus. It is to the process of listening and the importance of listening as fundamental to relationship-building that we now turn.

### Listening to God

There are many types of prayer. A great number of the ways persons are taught to pray as children have to do with talking. People learn to thank God for blessings, ask for God's guidance with challenges, intercede with petitions for others who have needs, and even recite traditional prayers, such as the Lord's Prayer, in group settings. Despite these many helpful examples of ways to talk to God, these are not the forms of prayer that are most indicative of creating a space for intentional listening to God. The path for listening is found through walking with an increased attentiveness to God and an intention to being open to listening to whatever God wants to bless us through sharing. While there is more than one way to listen to God in prayer, for the purposes of this project we will be using a combination of Lectio Divina and listening prayer.

Lectio Divina is a traditional form of Christian prayer that is focused on reading the scriptures and listening to what God may want to reveal through the text. The term lectio divina means "sacred reading" and is focused on being intentional about receiving what Word God wishes to share at that moment.<sup>25</sup> The process for practicing lectio

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<sup>25</sup> Butler, "Lectio Divina as a Tool for Discernment," 25.

divina is fairly simple, but also quite profound in experience. There are four parts to the process.

*Read (lectio):* Read the story that is told in God's word. Be present to the Word. Listen to it for information. Digest it. Absorb it.

*Reflect (meditatio):* Become actively involved with the story. Pay attention to what attracts your attention. Notice your own feelings. Reflect on your own inner experience of the scripture. Allow the Gospel (or other text) to be a mirror of your own life.

*Respond (oratio):* Be free to express what is pouring out of the reflection—praise, tears, repentance, thanksgiving, and so on. How is God becoming formed in you? Celebrate this with acceptance.

*Rest (complatio):* Let go of all reflections and responses in order to allow God to speak to you in the mystery of silence and quiet presence. Surrender to the mystery.<sup>26</sup>

By reading the scriptures with these things in mind, there is a deep richness that evolves as one experiences the message of God in a personal way. Through listening, reflecting, responding, and resting in God's presence, the person who practices lectio divina creates an intentional space for the Holy Spirit to speak uniquely to his/her needs.

In today's society, there seems to be an intense need to become much more intentional about seeking silence and listening to God. The term for this intentional development of interior silence is contemplative prayer. The practice of contemplative prayer is particularly helpful in today's world due to the excessive amounts of noise present every moment. There is a constant barrage of televisions in supermarkets and restaurants, internet access and media outlets at the touch of a fingertip, and prevalent use of background noise from Musak to heavy traffic. Everywhere one goes it seems that noise is already the main guest of honor at the table of daily life. In the midst of this din

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<sup>26</sup> Butler, 26.

of activity, the soul often yearns for quiet and the still small voice of the omnipresent Divine.

Carol Howard Merritt describes the experience of silence as a positive, healing agent used by God to strengthen and uplift persons who seek the Spirit in the way of contemplative prayer.

In the calm, we learn to listen to ourselves and for God. We tune into that still small voice and enfold our hurts as we would surround our own weeping child. With patient care, we place her gently on our lap, rock her back and forth, and smooth out her tangled hair. Looking into the wound, we clean it out, even though it stings, and then we smell all the rich tones of her scalp, loving her deeply.

As we do, gradually, we realize the arms of God growing up around us, and our lonely, searching desperation can rest with a parent who loves us deeply, who pats our back, untangles our hair, and adores the smell of our scalp. In silence, we learn to rest, embraced by God, whose arms ache with love for us, who longs to spend a moment with us, who has been looking for a quiet chance to whisper, “You are my beloved child. I am well pleased with you.”<sup>27</sup>

This beautiful image of a loving parent provides imagery that the mind can comprehend. Yet, for a more than comprehensible God whose love is bigger, richer, and deeper than one can imagine, this imagery is only a shadow of the genuine experience of God.

Contemplative prayer is a type of prayer that connects us with God in a deeply open and freeing self-giving experience. One avenue to developing this type of prayer life is through the practice of centering prayer. Many consider Father Thomas Keating to be the premier teacher of centering prayer living in modern times. He has written extensively about its practice and started a movement to create a connective network of centering prayer groups throughout the United States and other parts of the world.

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<sup>27</sup> Carol Howard Merritt, Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2007), 131.

For Keating, the process of centering prayer begins with a combination of attention and intention. The focus of attention on centering prayer is to simply be doing whatever it is that we are doing. Do not focus on what is in the future or the past, but simply be in the present moment and completely center on its reality. The intention needs to focus on consenting to God's presence through openness and the creation of inner silence that listens for the movement of the Spirit.<sup>28</sup> When one can focus these two elements of life, one is well on the way to becoming an active participant in the contemplative life.

Unlike a meditative life of generic origin, Christian contemplatives are seeking more than inner silence. They are seeking a profound level of relationship with the divine. Keating states, "Contemplative prayer is part of a dynamic process that evolves through personal relationship rather than by strategy."<sup>29</sup> One is not merely trying to silence the thoughts and emotions that may be noisily drowning out the solace sought by the soul. One is intentionally letting go of all that is within in order to consent to experience a relationship with the very presence of God. Yet, in a specifically Christian tradition, "Jesus in His divinity is the source of contemplation."<sup>30</sup> The goal of contemplation is to become one with God and experience divinity in a deeply personal way.

Persons come to God in centering prayer with an intention to willingly consent to the all-encompassing presence of God. However, it is God who moves to us as we wait patiently for divine action. We cannot make God do anything. God in God's infinite

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Keating, "The Practice of Attention/Intention," in Centering Prayer in Daily Life and Ministry (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1998), 16-17.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1994), 15.

<sup>30</sup> Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, 16.



love is wanting to share God's self with us and has already provided the avenues for the sharing through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit, then, is not given only once. He is an ongoing promise, an endless promise—a promise that is always fulfilled, and always being fulfilled, because he is infinite and boundless and can never be fully plumbed.

The Spirit is the ultimate promise of the Father. A promise is a free gift. No one can be bound to make a promise. Once a promise is made, however, one is bound. When God binds Himself, it is with absolute freedom, absolute fidelity. The Spirit, as a promise, is a gift, not a possession. He is a promise that has been communicated; hence, never to be taken back, since God is infinitely faithful to his promises. Note that the communication is by way of *gift*, not possession. Like the air we breathe, we can have all that we wish to take into our lungs; but it does not belong to us. If we try to take possession of it—stuff it in a closet for safekeeping—our efforts will be in vain. Air is not made to be possessed, and neither is the Spirit.<sup>31</sup>

God provides the Holy Spirit as a free and living gift filling each moment of our lives.

We are only responsible for being open to the Spirit's movement and for the practice of celebrating the Spirit in each moment without trying to possess or master its power in our lives. God seeks to be one with us, as evidenced through both the incarnation and the constant movement of the Spirit. "Between God and us, two extremes meet: He who is everything and we who are nothing at all. It is the Spirit who makes us one with God and in God, just as the Word is with God and is God."<sup>32</sup>

The starting place for persons who are seeking the Divine is to be aware of the trouble caused by the "false self". The self that develops as a result of the biases and primitive understanding of security and survival, power and control, and affection and

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Keating, The Heart of the World: A Spiritual Catechism (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1981), 74-75.

<sup>32</sup> Keating, Heart of the World, 76.

esteem is the self that stands in contrast to the true self.<sup>33</sup> One learns these contrasts and basic human needs as a child, causing great problems when trying to unlearn the lessons that were taught. When one is seeking the true self, the inner soul that was created by God and is still one with the Divine, one must put the false self aside in order to be able to focus on the fullness that is the Divine reality as opposed to the limited understanding caused by the human condition.<sup>34</sup> Keating explains,

The spiritual journey is not a career or a success story. It is a series of humiliations of the false self that become more and more profound. These make room inside us for the Holy Spirit to come in and heal. What prevents us from being available to God is gradually evacuated. We keep getting closer and closer to our center. Every now and then God lifts a corner of the veil and enters into our awareness through various channels, as if to say, "Here I am. Where are you? Come and join me."<sup>35</sup>

Getting closer to our spiritual center means coming closer to our true self and to God's presence. One must endure patiently the difficult, transformative process that ensues when God slowly confronts us with the false self within each of us. Only through letting go of all of the hurts, pains, and even self-centered joys of this life can we begin to live in the larger reality of God's awesome presence interconnecting all reality, both seen and unseen. Keating states,

By consenting to God's creation, to our basic goodness as human beings, and to the letting go of what we love in this world, we are brought to the final surrender, which is to allow the false self to die and the true self to emerge. The true self might be described as our participation in the divine life manifesting in our uniqueness.<sup>36</sup>

Once this union with the divine becomes better established, the next step is to reach outward again and touch others with the love of God. It is not enough to merely

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas Keating, The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation (Snowmass, CO: St. Benedict's Monastery, 1999), 13.

<sup>34</sup> Keating, Human Condition, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Keating, Human Condition, 38.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Keating, Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1995), 48.

become unattached to one's own false self and experience one's true self and union with the Divine. True union with the Divine is ultimately a transformative process that leads one to become the living Word of God for others.<sup>37</sup>

The transforming union is not a free ticket to happiness in this world. For some, this may mean a life of complete solitude full of loneliness; for others, it may mean an active apostolate that prevents them from enjoying the delights of divine union; for others again, it may mean intense suffering—physical, mental, or spiritual—which they undergo for some special intention or for the whole human family. Their transformed humanity makes their sufferings of immense value for the same reason that Jesus, because of his divine dignity, became the Savior of every human being, past, present, and future.<sup>38</sup>

God does not ignore the suffering of the world, and neither do those who are in union with God. In this way, the transformation of the false self to the true self begins to then transform the world from the false ideology and values it currently operates under to God's ideal that we are called to live.

Sacrifice and suffering are not negated by the experience of the transforming union. It is only the way they are experienced and the attitude that one has about them that is different. Keating explains,

Sacrifice is absolutely essential for human growth; yet the abiding disposition of sacrifice is rarely established without some experience of suffering. Of course suffering itself does not make one holy and can even lead to despair. Despair is suffering that fails to teach.

A clear distinction must be made between sacrifice and suffering. Suffering is the conscious experience of pain. Sacrifice can also involve conscious pain, but it is primarily an attitude. The attitude of sacrifice can transform suffering into joy. We bring many needless sufferings on ourselves, and these God does not will. But to suffer as a member of a fallen race and to endure the consequences of the human condition is what the Son of God himself did. This form of suffering may be an important part of our purification.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Keating, Heart of the World, 48.

<sup>38</sup> Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, 105.

<sup>39</sup> Keating, Heart of the World, 18.

Suffering is part of our own spiritual growth experience. Learning how to be with others in their suffering is an intentional action motivated by the transforming love of God within. In this way, centering prayer and the contemplative life leads one from self-centeredness to other-centeredness through God-centeredness. This is foundational for the living of Godbearing as described in Chapter 3. Lectio divina and the contemplative lifestyle blossom through sharing love in community.

David Forbes Morgan shares about the connection of lectio divina, contemplative prayer, and community in his article, "Centering Prayer and Community."<sup>40</sup> His chart illustrates the connections of the three as follows:

<i>Embrace the affirmation that the risen Jesus is among us as the glorified Christ living in each of us, present everywhere at all times. Formally begin the relationship of prayer by becoming acquainted.</i>	<i>Lectio read and listen to the story of God's grace with the ears of your heart. Become familiar with the information being given; seek to record it. Personally encounter Christ.</i>	<i>Cooperate Be present and listen to those God has called you to be with. Let your heart embrace their strengths and woundedness with God's healing grace. Offer yourself to each one in weakness or strength. Get acquainted.</i>

<sup>40</sup> David Forbes Morgan, "Centering Prayer and Community," in Centering Prayer in Daily Life and Ministry, ed. Gustave Reininger (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1998), 100-06.

*Consent* to God's presence and action within you and manifested everywhere and in everything. Recognize relationship with the divine presence in the context of friendly conversation.

*Meditatio*-Ponder and reflect. Let Holy Scripture mirror your heart and unfolding life. Enter into discursive meditation.

*Consider*-See each person as important to you. Consent to the divine possibilities in your true self, one with God, and the true self in others. See no one as unimportant, as dispensable.

*Permit* the work of the Divine presence within to take place, knowing that the unloading of the false self moves you to the expulsive power of a new awareness and affection. Do not fear. Only trust in God's unconditional love. Enter into committed friendship.

*Oratio*-Respond to the work of God's Spirit. Acknowledge woundedness and recovery in Christ Jesus. Celebrate all creation and God's redeeming graces inwardly. Permit trust to be renewed. Praise God! Give thanks! Weep! Ask for forgiveness! Rejoice! Be spontaneous!

*Comfort*-Console and encourage those who are suffering in the woundedness and the unloading of the false self. Be open to the vision of others. Speak kind words to everyone and celebrate their uniqueness. Seek to enable and encourage.

*Open*-Rest in the silence and the solitude. Open by faith to the ultimate mystery, the rooted ground of your being and the source from whom life emerges. Let intimacy draw you into the union of life.

*Contemplatio*-Rest in silence and solitude. Let the supreme divine forming mystery possess your being all that you are or hope to be. Surrender to the divine forming mystery. Be a mystic. Embrace the unknown with love.

*Calm*-Rest with a nonanxious presence regarding others. By faith, believe that God's grace is operating at all times. Remember peace is each step of the way.

These concepts outline how centering prayer and lectio divina mirror one's engagement with the community. If we are to become Christian Godbearers, we must learn how to engage with these spiritual disciplines in order to become more effective vessels of God's

healing love in a suffering, hurting world. The first step is to learn how to connect with our true self and become one with the divine. Connecting with God in deep, profound ways is the center of our being as Godbearing people. Then, knowing how to listen to what God has done, is doing, and will do through our lives is the next step.

### Listening to Self

One cannot truly listen to another before becoming aware of how to listen to one's self. In order to get increasing self-awareness, one must understand the meaning of one's life, one's experiences, triumphs, challenges, and sufferings. A person who illustrated the profound effects of the need for meaning-making and the power of human attitude was Viktor Frankl. In his seminal text, Man's Search for Meaning, he enumerates his own search for meaning by working through his autobiographical background of being a prisoner in concentration camps during World War II. Through the telling of his own story, he is able to find meaning for himself in life as well as try to find ways to inspire others to find meaning in their lives as well. His life experiences in the concentration camp increase his conviction that human beings are self-determinant, future-oriented creatures who need hope and meaning in order to survive and thrive.

Frankl does not deny that life is fraught with difficult circumstances. At times, there is even great cause for suffering; although he does not recommend suffering needlessly as this is a form of masochism, not heroism.<sup>41</sup> Frankl firmly believes that circumstances do not have the final say over the human spirit. It is how one handles the circumstances of life and the attitude that one takes in response to suffering and challenges that is one's inner freedom. He states, "It is this spiritual freedom—which

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<sup>41</sup> Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 113.

cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful and purposeful.”<sup>42</sup> One can use even the most difficult of trials to rise above one’s own self to achieve something through what one must suffer.<sup>43</sup>

For Frankl, the question of life is not about how much suffering one has had or must endure. Rather, the question is about the *why* behind the suffering and what meaning can come from it. As he counseled others, he explained,

As we said before, any attempt to restore a man’s inner strength in the camp had to first succeed in showing him some future goal. Nietzsche’s words, “He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*,” could be the guiding motto for all psychotherapeutic and psychohygienic efforts regarding prisoners. Whenever there was an opportunity for it, one had to give them a why—an aim—for their lives, in order to strengthen them to bear the terrible *how* of their existence. Woe to him who saw no more sense in his life, no aim, no purpose, and therefore no point in carrying on. He was soon lost... We had to learn ourselves, and furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that *it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us*. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk or meditation, but in right action and right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.<sup>44</sup>

Listening to those around him, both throughout his time in the concentration camps and in his psychotherapy sessions, he was able to help persons to find meaning in their suffering and move forward into the future with hope.

At the same time, one cannot look into the future with hope without grasping the lessons of the past. Frankl believed that older persons were to be particularly valued because they were full of a host of lived realities which had been experiences of their past that continued to exist regardless of the fact they were in times gone by. In contrast to

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<sup>42</sup> Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning, 67.

<sup>43</sup> Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning, 68.

<sup>44</sup> Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning, 76-77.

the young, the older, more experienced person had “instead of possibilities in the future, they have realities in the past—the potentialities they have actualized, the meanings they have fulfilled, the values they have realized—and nothing and nobody can ever remove these assets from the past.”<sup>45</sup> Appreciating the lessons learned from the past, one can find meaning of one’s life in greater depth through evaluating the fullness of a life already having been lived.

Whether one is looking at life from the stance of what has been lived or what one has yet to experience, in either case there is a primary need for understanding one’s responsibility for self-determination and need for self-transcendence. Self-transcendence according to Frankl

denotes the fact that being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself—be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. What is called self-actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, self-actualization is possible only as a side effect of self-transcendence...we can discover this meaning in life in three different ways: (1) by creating a work or doing a deed; (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; and (3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering.<sup>46</sup>

It is not enough in Frankl’s view to merely review one’s own experiences to find value and meaning. Instead, the real goal of finding meaning in one’s life is about discovering how to use the knowledge gained to see one’s own importance and impact on the lives of others as well. Learning how to love is the highest calling. Living rightly does not limit one to one’s own creative works and deeds, but it also includes loving others and helping those who are suffering or in need. These tenets delineated in Frankl’s writing not only

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<sup>45</sup> Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning, 151.

<sup>46</sup> Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning, 110-11.



are helpful in increasing self-awareness through the process of spiritual autobiography but also essential in supporting the concept of Godbearing that was discussed in the last chapter and will be continually expounded upon as this paper continues.

Developing an increasing self-awareness and discovering meaning in one's life are essential parts of learning to better listen to one's self. Like Frankl, beginning with looking at one's own life story is a key element to develop the skills to be able to understand how one might work towards self-transcendence. One must know how one is looking at life in order to be able to put self aside and help someone else be able to examine her/his life more fully. For the purposes of this project, guided spiritual autobiography will be used to teach persons in a small group setting about reviewing one's life in order to find new meaning and purpose, thereby being able to better engage the future with hope.

The principles of the guided spiritual autobiography used will be based upon James Birren and Donna Deutchman's text, Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults Exploring the Fabric of Life. Their method of guided autobiography helps persons to look at their lives again in order to explore things in the past that might not have been appreciated. It teaches persons about writing short two-page, theme-based papers in their personal time to encourage thoughtful reflection. Their method then directs persons in sharing their writings in a small group setting with the guidance and moderation of a trained leader.<sup>47</sup>

There are many therapeutic benefits of using guided autobiography in groups. Although their text is written through the lens of working with older adults, the basic lessons and concepts are not age-limited. Anyone who is re-evaluating their life

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<sup>47</sup> Birren and Deutchman, Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults, 1.

experiences could no doubt learn a great deal from the process of guided autobiography. They state, “Often, feelings of significance are derived not from rediscovery or reappraisal of a single major experience but rather from reviewing the life course as a whole—discovering the cumulative experiences and what they add up to.”<sup>48</sup> By seeing what persons have already been through and overcome in their lives, they are able to have more self-confidence in their own abilities to handle trials and hardships.<sup>49</sup> Through this increase in self-confidence, persons are then able to have a stronger drive toward a positive, successful future.<sup>50</sup> Persons who have identified their past strengths are more likely to continue to develop that skill set for future actions.<sup>51</sup> In fact, “older persons who engage in guided autobiography are more likely to maintain an orientation toward the future, continuing to plan for future needs and to approach future challenges with mental vitality.”<sup>52</sup> Guided autobiography helps to promote “reconciliation of life’s contradictions” and instill within the participant a “greater meaning achieved through review of one’s life and the sense of a legacy.”<sup>53</sup> Although Birren and Deutchman are discussing older adults, these concepts would likely be true for all age groups.

Guided autobiography helps to heal the imbalances within a person’s constructed self. Birren and Deutchman describe the construction of identity as follows:

Each person constructs an identity based on analyses of the differences in three versions of the self: (1) the *real* self as defined by personal interpretation of the actual self, (2) the *ideal* self, a model of the “perfect” self, the person he or she would like to be, and (3) the *social-image* self, a person’s perception of how other people view him or her. It could be argued that self-esteem arises from an evaluation of the difference between the real and ideal selves; while self-efficacy, the feeling that you

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<sup>48</sup> Birren and Deutchman, Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults, 6.

<sup>49</sup> Birren and Deutchman, Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults, 6-7.

<sup>50</sup> Birren and Deutchman, Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults, 7.

<sup>51</sup> Birren and Deutchman, Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Birren and Deutchman, Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults, 21.

<sup>53</sup> Birren and Deutchman, Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults, 22.

are competent and can have the impact you seek, is measured by the congruency between the ideal self and the social-image self. Self-actualization, satisfaction with who you are and a feeling of fulfillment from what you have accomplished, might then be viewed as determined by the distance between these three selves, with the greatest degree of self-actualization obtained by those whose ideal, real, and social-image selves converge.

A large difference among the three images of the self creates tension and discomfort. Alternatively, a high level of similarity of the images is accompanied by contentment and security in relation to others. Guided autobiography helps to clarify and reduce the difference between the ideal and actual selves and exposes the social image to scrutiny and review.<sup>54</sup>

Reconciling these images of the self results in “greater understanding, an increased sense of importance, and feelings of support and mastery.”<sup>55</sup>

The way the growth occurs through group process is greatly dependent upon the trust and nurture built. A key determinant to the development of trust is incremental developmental exchange. The developmental exchange is “the mutual sharing among members of who they are and where they come from, their personally important historical and emotional events.”<sup>56</sup> When this sharing is accomplished in a non-judgmental, supportive atmosphere, conditions become favorable for healing and wholeness to take root and grow. It is the leader who models non-judgmental communication and supportive listening, but all must participate in like manner for the best therapeutic milieu to develop.<sup>57</sup>

During the weeks of group meetings for guided autobiography, topics are discussed each week that build relationships from casual acquaintance to trusted confidante. The topics begin with more comfortable issues like life branching points,

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<sup>54</sup> Birren and Deutchman, Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults, 10-11.

<sup>55</sup> Birren and Deutchman, Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults, 11.

<sup>56</sup> Birren and Deutchman, Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults, 44.

<sup>57</sup> Birren and Deutchman, Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults, 48.

family history, and major life work. However, they move quickly into more personal areas such as the role of money, body image, sexuality, and feelings about death.<sup>58</sup> There are sensitizing questions used to guide the participants in thinking about each topic and writing their two-page document.<sup>59</sup> Sharing these experiences with others becomes empowering, freeing, and life-affirming.

Birren and Deutchman do not include spirituality as an intentional element of their guided autobiography process. For the purposes of this project, questions have been added to the sensitizing questions list that intentionally engage the participant in faith-exploration and spiritual self-discernment. In this way, there will be a natural inclusion of discussion of spirituality as the process unfolds. For the purposes of working with church small groups, the discussion of faith seems particularly necessary. However, faith is a common subject of importance that needs to be considered for inclusion whether these groups are church-based or not.

Guided spiritual autobiography is the method chosen for self-awareness enhancement in this project. It was chosen due to its dual personally-enriching and intensely relational nature. Both of these elements are necessary to help develop listening to self in order to work towards listening to others. Once the process of learning about one's self is appropriately undertaken and explored, it is then imperative to move toward the next process—learning how to develop empathetic listening skills to more effectively listen to others.

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<sup>58</sup> Birren and Deutchman, Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults, 67-74.

<sup>59</sup> These questions can be found in Appendix C.

### Listening to Others

Each person living in the world has a unique story. None are more important or less important than others. Each life is inherently valuable simply because it shares an existence with every other living thing in an interconnected web of reality that we call our universe. Somehow, God in God's incredible creativity and diversity has managed to be present through everything that is, was, or ever will be. One fascinating thing about our human existence is that we get the opportunity to seek to know about life in intentional, growth-oriented ways. The experience of learning about the world around us starts when we are born, but it does not end throughout our entire lifespan. How we learn and who we help along the way, however, is our responsibility and privilege. In this section, the author will discuss one way of learning that can be particularly helpful in our learning during life—empathetic listening.

Empathetic listening is a non-judgmental approach to listening whose main focus is to discover with the speaker the deeper meaning of what is being said in order that both the speaker and the listener may learn together and be strengthened in value and relationship. Carolyn Bohler uses the metaphors of mirrors and archeologists to illustrate the process of empathetic listening. As an archeologist, empathetic listeners begin by asking questions of the speaker. "Asking question after question is like digging, searching for a clue, being an archeologist. Once I find the treasure, I can tell that to the person."<sup>60</sup> Or, as a mirror for others as one empathetically listens, one must consider the following points:

A mirror reflects ACCURATELY. (It doesn't show what someone wants to

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<sup>60</sup> Carolyn Bohler, Wednesday evening class at Aldersgate United Methodist Church, Tustin, CA, October 2005.

see.)

A mirror is *not* a wall. (Walls echo or are silent; mirrors give back what stands in front.)

A mirror doesn't tell it's own story, but shows only the one standing there.

A mirror doesn't say "ummmhmm" or "I understand."

A mirror doesn't give extra information (that may be helpful); it just shows what IS.

However the person in front of the mirror may not have seen before so clearly what IS!<sup>61</sup>

Empathetic listening is not about having the right answer or feeling pressure that one must come up with something appropriate to say. Empathetic listening is about truly searching for the meaning in what the other person is trying to say, hearing the depth of feeling in the person who is speaking, and showing them that you value them for who they are in that particular moment and time. It is true that most persons have an inner knowledge of what is best for them. They only need someone with them who will truly listen to what they have to say.

When I'm working with you, we will get very quickly to the understanding that you already know everything you need to know and do. You know what's important to you, what you feel bad about—I can't contribute to that. But if I listen to you and I accurately reflect what you are saying back to you, you have a chance to actually hear what you're saying. Many of us talk and don't deeply listen to ourselves, but when we do, we find we are provided access to our own wisdom. This is a gorgeous thing because it demonstrates that we ourselves have first access to the wisdom that we're seeking. It's active and living inside each one of us.<sup>62</sup>

By valuing others, one not only increases the feeling of self-worth in the other individual, but also within him/herself as well. For as one learns how to better listen to others, inevitably one also begins to learn increasingly about oneself.

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<sup>61</sup> Carolyn Bohler, class.

<sup>62</sup> Cheiri Huber, "Fierce Listening," in The Wisdom of Listening, ed. Mark Brady (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 279.

It is no accident that the order of listening in this project comes first in learning to listen to God, then self, then other. In order to really be able to be open to the story of another, one must not let one's own thoughts and feelings hinder that process. In order to do this, one must build confidence and personal self-worth through building relationship with God and self. Centering prayer is an excellent way to begin this process due to its meditative qualities. There is a great power to becoming more mindful and attentive not only in prayer, but also in daily life. Thoughts will come up during listening as a natural part of thinking and reasoning, but one need not get caught in the trap of following those thoughts to distraction from listening if one's mind is trained towards attentiveness.

The first basic listening skill to practice is really paying attention. From our meditation practice we know that our minds tend to jump around. First we're present, then we're not. The same thing happens when we are with others. We might begin by listening carefully, then suddenly we're lost in our own thoughts about something else. When we notice this we can gently bring ourselves back. If we've been absent so long that we've lost track of what's being said, we can say so. This lets others know that we really do want to know what they're saying.<sup>63</sup>

The mind that is attentive to the other is able to listen at a much deeper level than is normally practiced in daily listening. This type of listening is a learned skill, perhaps even an art, that takes both time and diligence to master. Springing forth out of genuine love and compassion, it can be a life-changing force for the better.

Truly being present with another in an empathetic form of listening is both challenging and rewarding. Using our attention to benefit others and not only ourselves out of love and compassion is a growth-filled experience. Kathleen Dowling Singh explains,

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<sup>63</sup> Karen Kissel Wegela, "Being a Good Listener," in The Wisdom of Listening, ed. Mark Brady (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 213-14.

When we deliberately and consciously practice the gift of attention, it is not with the ordinary mind of self-cherishing that we listen to another or simply be with another. It is with a much more open and inclusive mindfulness, motivated by compassion. In such deep listening, we listen far more with our hearts than with our ears. It is helpful to think of this experience as “listening with the third ear.” The third ear, of course, is the heart. ...

Deep listening, simply being with another, is subtle and involves much more of our being than we ordinarily invest in listening, in being together. We allow the sounds and the silences and the words and the meaning behind the words to touch our heart, such an act enabled by our intention, mindfulness, and full presence. The practice of the gift of attention is an act of commitment, of engaged loving. Recognizing the profundity of the very act of interpersonal communication, we let our whole being resonate with the other person, just as our whole being might resonate with a mantra or the radiant lights of an inner mandala.<sup>64</sup>

One must seek to love through listening. Listening not only requires meditative-like patience, but also attentiveness that engages the whole of one’s being.

Like the Golden Rule, one must seek to listen to others as one would like also for others to listen to them. One of the things this entails is discernment about the difference between one’s own issues and the issues of the other person. In order not to project one’s own thoughts or judgments onto a situation, great care must be taken to identify the voices within oneself that may be hindering one hearing what the other person is really saying. Margaret Truxaw illustrates this in talking about conversation with an intimate partner.

When I am listening to my partner with skill, I can see more clearly which elements of a conflict belong to him and which belong to me. If I feel a strong emotional reaction to what he says, it is almost certain that something tender and vulnerable in me has been touched, and it is useful to note that for when it is my turn to be the speaker. When I am in a conversation without consciousness and care, my subjective reactions can spill out with little control, and the listening temporarily comes to an end. When I can tune my attention with awareness to his core dynamic, there is

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<sup>64</sup> Kathleen Dowling Singh, “The Gift of Attention,” in The Wisdom of Listening, ed. Mark Brady (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 202.



a better chance that the container will be strong enough for deeper healing work to begin. I can see my own needs and wants as well as his.<sup>65</sup>

It is appropriate to begin these practices of listening at home for many reasons. Perhaps one of the greatest is when one can practice listening better to one that is already loved. Loving the stranger may not be as easy as loving one's spouse, children, or friends. Yet, no matter where the practice is started, it is all about becoming more loving to those around us.

When we are committed to learning for its own sake rather than accumulating knowledge, every experience becomes a teacher. Learning from our interpersonal relationships becomes a priority because much of our lives is spent with other people. In fact we are always in relationship regardless of whether we are with people or alone.

The greatest gift we can offer is the gift of our understanding. Each of us in our hearts seeks to be understood for to be understood is to be loved. Understanding requires the total participation of the mind and heart of the listener. There can be no evaluation or judgment, just listening with caring attention. The speaker can then grow naturally in whatever way is most appropriate.<sup>66</sup>

It is not the job of the listener to determine the exact way a speaker should be directed in thinking or action. The job of the listener is to help the speaker to discern the strength and wholeness possible within themselves and learn how to become a more whole person through being heard, valued, and—to the best of one's ability—understood.

There are many questions that listeners can ask themselves in order to identify stumbling blocks within themselves to their own practices of listening. It is a particularly necessary venture for the listener to be intentional about self-evaluation due to the fact that we often are taught it is more important to be heard than to hear.

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<sup>65</sup> Margaret Truxaw, "The Healing Power of Being Deeply Heard," in The Wisdom of Listening, ed. Mark Brady (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 54.

<sup>66</sup> Rodney Smith, "Listening from the Heart," in The Wisdom of Listening, ed. Mark Brady (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 261.

The inner tapes of human conditioning press hard to reel off and be heard—they do not want to make way for listening to others. How can I possibly hear you when I am dying to say something myself? How can I take the time and care to understand you when I think that I am right and you are wrong? When I'm sure that I know better? When I sorely need to be given attention and resent anyone else getting it?

Can I hear you when I have fixed images about how you have been in the past, how you have criticized or flattered me?

Can I listen freely when I would like you to be different from the way you are?

Is there the patience to listen to you when I think I already know what you are going to say?

Am I open to listen to you when I'm judging you? Judgments and prejudices lie deeply hidden in the recesses of the mind and require curiosity and inner transparency in order to be discovered. Only what is discovered can end.

Do I really hear what you are saying when I imagine you to be holy, to be worshipped, adored, and surrendered to?

Will I expect every word you say to be infallible wisdom? Or the opposite—can I hear what you are saying when I am convinced that you are stupid?

Am I listening to you the same way that I listen to someone else?

We can add more and more to this list but the important thing is to start questioning our listening fundamentally. Not asking, "How can I achieve pure listening?" but rather, "Where is my listening coming from this moment, in the light of all these questions?" Is it hampered by different ideas and attitudes or does it arise from a moment of being truly present—at one with you and your whole situation?<sup>67</sup>

In order to listen empathetically to another, one must be able to reflect cognitively on one's own biases and judgments. These questions are a starting place, but certainly are not the only hurdles that must be jumped in order to become a competent empathetic listener.

Some of the other things that need to be considered are our own assumptions, emotions, and needs. These elements make it even more imperative that we find a peace within ourselves and get to know ourselves before we reach out to help others. Often the adage rings true, "What we can't tolerate in others is what we can't tolerate in

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<sup>67</sup> Toni Packer, "Finding a New Way to Listen," in *The Wisdom of Listening*, ed. Mark Brady (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 239.

ourselves.”<sup>68</sup> Therefore, it is even more important to identify our own loves and hates, strengths and weaknesses in order not to let them get in the way of our hearing another person.

Finding the “parts” (obstacles or constraints) that get in the way of our receptivity and then releasing these constraints is a very different way of thinking from accusing ourselves of being immature or selfish or inadequate. It isn’t that we’re bad listeners; it’s our hidden emotional agenda that crowds out understanding and concern. When we clear away automatic emotional reactions—criticism, fear, hurt—we get to compassion, curiosity, and tenderness. Instead of condemning ourselves for being “bad listeners,” we can learn to identify and relax those parts of ourselves that interfere. In so doing, we release ourselves for effective listening.<sup>69</sup>

In this process of learning to listen, we are led back repeatedly towards the importance of growth-oriented wholeness. The use of centering prayer—listening to God—and spiritual autobiography—listening to self—are both tools used to help identify ways to nurture wholeness and health within the self that we may become healing agents in a hurting world. As we move into a more healthy place ourselves, we then begin to be truly able to be open to others in deeper, richer ways. As we are able to heal ourselves with the help of the Holy Spirit, we then are freed to reach out and midwife wholeness in others who are in need all around us.

In the next chapter, the experience of one small group led by the author at a local United Methodist church that was formed to implement these practices will be discussed in detail. The formation of the group, its participants, their experiences, and evaluation will all be described. In so doing, the author intends to learn whether or not these practices make the practice of Godbearing more practical in everyday life.

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<sup>68</sup> Nichols, *Lost Art of Listening*, 93.

<sup>69</sup> Nichols, *Lost Art of Listening*, 87.

## CHAPTER 5

### Case Study with Listening Model

In the previous chapter, the author set the academic groundwork for the building of a growth-oriented small group whose focus is to teach the participants to become Godbearers in the world through listening-based evangelism. This will be accomplished through forming a Clinebell-styled growth group as discussed in chapter four. In the group, participants will learn how to hone their skills of listening to God, self, and other. The skills developed will be in the areas of centering prayer and lectio divina, guided spiritual autobiography, and empathetic listening. The study will seek to discover whether the integration of these practices in a small group and in the daily lives of its participants makes a positive difference toward becoming more confident Godbearers in practical ways for regular use.

#### Setting and Participant Selection

The setting for the small group is the Ojai United Methodist Church in Ojai, CA. Ojai, CA is a small town of around 22,000 persons situated 15 miles inland from Ventura, CA. Ojai is a stable community that is not projected to grow more than one percent in the next few years. Approximately 85% of the population is either middle American or affluent families with twelve percent being seniors. Seventy-eight percent of the town is Anglo, eighteen percent of people are Hispanic, and other ethnicities are seldom and scattered. The largest percentage of the population is millenials (4-23 years) at 28%, followed closely by boomers (45-62 years) at 27%. Survivors (24-44 years) are 24% of the populous, and silent's (63 to 80) are 12% of persons living in the town. Seventy-two

percent of households with children are married couples, twenty percent are single mothers, and seven percent are single fathers. Sixty-five percent of adults living in Ojai have had some college education, graduated from college, or have post-graduate degrees. The area is seen as low-stress, pro-marriage and family, and concerned about hopes and dreams, as well as community problems and needs. They are also seen as resistant to change and have a low level of involvement in Christian religious affiliations compared to the national average. However, seventy-six percent of households are likely to “express a preference for some particular religious tradition or affiliation.”<sup>1</sup>

In the midst of this town lies the particular setting for our group, the Ojai United Methodist Church. Ojai UMC is fifty years old and has been engaged with its community in a variety of ways. Two of the most prominent ways known by the greater community are through creation and support of HELP of Ojai and Noah’s Ark Preschool. HELP of Ojai is a community service organization that provides assistance to persons in need throughout the town. Noah’s Ark Preschool is on site at Ojai UMC and has a reputation of being a well-respected learning environment for young children. The people of Ojai UMC have endured both flood and fire in their fifty-year history, even having to rebuild the church as a result. This overcoming of adversity is a source of both strength and pride for its members, who seem to have a genuine affection and community spirit among them.

Ojai UMC is a small, Caucasian congregation that has been struggling in the past several years to fight a decline in numbers of people and income. The church has 107 members and a normal Sunday worship attendance of 65 persons. It is 98% Caucasian in

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<sup>1</sup> All demographic information gathered from First View 2005, Percept Group, for the zip code of Ojai, CA 93023.

ethnicity with the majority of members being married persons with families, most of whose children are grown and no longer living at home. The congregants are primarily middle-class persons, around 90% of whom have finished high school and 60% of whom are college-educated. Most of the persons who attend the church are older than 55 years of age. Around 10% of attendees are between 35-55 years of age and 10% are younger than 35 years old. Approximately 30% of church members live in Ojai, 15% live in Ventura, and the other 55% live in the small towns surrounding Ojai such as Oak View and Mira Monte.<sup>2</sup>

The persons who were chosen for the small group project were on a volunteer basis. After talking about the project in church, the author set out a sign-up sheet after Sunday service. The first eight people who signed up were then called by the author one at a time for more conversation about the class. After describing the class and its expectations, persons were then asked if they were interested in the class knowing the requirements. Seven out of the eight people who signed up were engaged in these conversations and expressed interest to become involved. The first day, six out of the eight showed up for the first class. The one who could not come was unable to attend due to unexpected health issues. Two more persons had to exit the class after the first week due to pressing life circumstances outside their control. The other four continued for the remainder of the class. Of the four who completed the class there were three women. One woman was in her mid-twenties, two were in their eighties. The fourth participant was a male in his eighties. One participant has been a member of Ojai UMC for only a couple of years, the rest have been members there for three decades or longer.

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<sup>2</sup> Information combined from data taken from 2007 Charge Conference packet of Ojai UMC and data gathered from their current pastor, Rev. David Camphouse.

All four participants had been living in Ojai for twenty years or more, and all four were Caucasian.

### Methodology

This project has heavy emphasis on building, nurturing, and sustaining quality relationships through development of listening skills. The data that will be gathered will be subjective information based solely on the experience of the participants. Their lives, stories, and interactions will be the primary evidence of learning and growth. For that reason, the author has chosen a narrative research approach. Leslie Rebecca Bloom writes about narrative research in the following way:

Narrative research, as a strand of qualitative research, focuses on the “self” for data collection and data analysis. There are three central theoretical goals that structure the narrative research approach. First, narrative research is concerned with using individual lives as the primary source of data. Second, it is concerned with using narratives of the “self” as a location from which the researcher can generate social critique and advocacy. Third, narrative research is concerned with deconstructing the “self” as a humanist conception, allowing for nonunitary conceptions of the self. While not all narrative researchers would agree with these three theoretical goals, those of us who are committed to feminist and/or postmodern approaches to research tend to agree that these goals structure how we collect and interpret the data.<sup>3</sup>

The research that will take place within this small group will be centered on each “self” in the group and their sharing through autobiography, discussion, and group participation. The approach taken “relies on the subjective, phenomenological experience of people, and not their objectification. This research tries to represent these views as assumption-

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<sup>3</sup> Leslie Rebecca Bloom, “From Self to Society: Reflections on the Power of Narrative Inquiry,” in Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis, ed. Sharan B. Merriam and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2002), 310.

free as possible, although we of course acknowledge that assumptions are always present.”<sup>4</sup>

In the narrative type of research, it is important to not only take into account the surface of someone’s story and experiences. It is also important to consider the fullness of the aspects of the story, learning as much as possible about all dimensions of the story to provide a richer context and wealth of information for understanding the narrative. D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly explain,

Elsewhere (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994), we wrote about two of these dimensions, following Dewey’s notion of interaction, by focusing on what we call four directions in any inquiry: *inward* and *outward*, *backward* and *forward*. By inward, we mean toward the internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions. By outward, we mean toward the existential conditions, that is, the environment. By backward and forward, we refer to temporality—past, present, and future. We wrote that *to experience an experience*—that is, to do research into an experience—is to experience it simultaneously in these four ways and to ask questions pointing each way. Thus, when one is positioned on this two-dimensional space in any particular inquiry, one asks questions, collects field notes, derives interpretations, and writes a research text that addresses both personal and social issues by looking inward and outward, and addresses temporal issues by looking not only to the event but to its past and to its future.<sup>5</sup>

In the use of guided autobiography, narrative research that helps to “experience the experience” is particularly appropriate. Helping those who are telling their life stories to be able to share the depth of the particular memory through asking appropriate questions and listening with genuine interest is fundamental. These questions are not for the purpose of setting up an interrogation, however. Questions are meant to be a part of

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<sup>4</sup> Petruska Clarkson and Yuko Nippoda, “The Experienced Influence or Effect of Cultural/Racism Issues on the Practice of Counselling Psychology: A Qualitative Study of One Multicultural Training Organization,” in *Multicultural Counseling: A Reader*, ed. Stephen Palmer (London; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), 224.

<sup>5</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*, 50.



enriching the experience for the person remembering it and for those listening in the group as well, who are learning to be effective and supportive listeners in the process.

Being the researcher and the leader of the small group is to be handled with both intention and care. The author is new to the setting of the church and, up until this group, was relatively unfamiliar with the persons who attended there. Due to the unfamiliarity with the setting, the author would have to self-identify as more of an outsider than insider in this setting.

The strength of the outsider, which derives from entering the setting totally naïve of any meaning, is a heightened sensitivity to all its expressions. He or she is very alert and sees everything as if for the first time. In fact, the outsider is so bombarded with all the signs, gestures, names, settings, schedules—everything—and can interpret so little of it, that the experience can become emotionally overwhelming.

To compensate for this—to begin expanding the participatory role—the researcher must either endure mystification for the days or weeks required to gain an orientation, or spend very limited amounts of time in the environment spaced by extended periods of outside reorientation used for taking extensive notes, mapping out the setting and its schedule, or focusing on one particular aspect of the experience, such as its décor (its most noticeable labels, costumes, roles, etc.). The investigator may also obtain the support of a “strategic informant,” a marginal participant who can be a companion on the quest, translating the significance of all that she or he does not understand. One must especially be skilled at recording, but then setting aside all one’s early interpretations. The outsider will have an intense need to create meanings and gain some security in the new setting. These early meanings are bound to be superficial and have a high degree of projection from the observer’s past experiences rather than faithfully interpret the setting.<sup>6</sup>

As an outsider, the author was able to come into this context without many preconceived ideas about the persons in the group, the setting itself, or the way group dynamics would develop. The “strategic informant” who has acted as a companion on the journey of the

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<sup>6</sup> Larry VandeCreek, Hilary E. Bender, and Merle R. Jordan, Research in Pastoral Care and Counseling: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches (Decatur, GA: Journal of Pastoral Care Publications, 1994), 106.

implementation of the project was the primary advisor for this project, Rev. Dr. William Clements. Through weekly meetings with her advisor, the author was able to discuss upcoming plans for the group, review dynamics and changes in the group soon after they happened, and work through any personal feelings related to the project which may have interfered with the process of the organic development of the group.

Due to the subjective nature of the study, the author chose to utilize an evaluation tool combining Likert scales and personal reflection. Seven “I” statements reflecting the goals of the project were written by the author. Participants were then asked to circle the number on the Likert scale that most clearly states their feeling of association with the statement. Then, underneath the Likert scale, the participants were given an opportunity to briefly explain their answers. These evaluations were administered immediately before the first session and immediately after the closing session. Then, a comparative analysis of the two evaluations from each participant will illuminate the strengths and weakness of the small group as it was implemented for this project.<sup>7</sup>

### Class Design

In the process of designing a class on listening, the first thing that the author did was to listen to God, self, and others. The premise of this action as primary for the start of the development of class design was not only fundamental to the design, but also pivotal for seeking the Holy Spirit’s guidance in what way to proceed. If one is to teach listening to others, it stands to reason that one must first begin by learning to practice listening on one’s own first. Before the development of the class structure, during its

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix E for Evaluation Tool used.

formation and implementation, and afterwards, the author believed it to be of utmost importance to practice the means of grace in her own life.

As a United Methodist clergywoman, the author believes that the means of grace described by Wesley and practiced by millions of Christians throughout the centuries are key elements to sustaining one's connection with the Spirit. Through sustaining that connection, one opens up one's heart and mind to the movement and inspiration that only the Spirit can give. This does not mean that one is perfect in understanding all the Spirit has to teach, but rather that one is open to being led in the Spirit's direction. There are several practices that are considered "means of grace" in our faith community.

Baptism and Holy Communion are most often celebrated in the gathered worshipping community. In the United Methodist tradition these sacraments are administered by ordained clergy (or those appointed to a particular charge under the supervision of a district superintendent). We understand both sacraments to be "means of grace by which God works invisibly in us, quickening, strengthening, and confirming our faith" (from *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church—2000.* ) ...

Other means of grace are both public and private and are not considered sacraments. They are equally important, however, and there is a sense in which each of them is sacred. In the previous chapter means of grace were described as works of mercy and works of piety. Nonsacramental means of grace include worship, prayer, Bible study, fasting, service to others, and Christian conferencing. Each of them brings us closer to God. It is through the continuing practice of the means of grace that we are formed as Christian disciples.<sup>8</sup>

Through practicing the means of grace, one can regain some humility in knowing the group is not about the leader, but about God's role in persons' lives. Also, one can regain some hope that God may do more than a few things that will surprise and teach the leader of the group, not just the participants in the study, along the way. By paying attention to

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<sup>8</sup> Barb Nardi Kurtz, *The Heart's Journey: Christian Spiritual Formation in the Life of a Small Group* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2001), 16.

God's role in the project, another level of learning is available that may not have been otherwise.

It is also important to have a space to talk about the type of leader one wants to be. One must realize there are many emotional dynamics involved in leading a group, particularly one in which there is so much time and energy invested! In spite of the fact there are obvious personal attachments to the material, one must be able to show emotional maturity and keep appropriate boundaries.

Small group leaders whose lives give evidence of spiritual fruit are not anxious and emotionally reactive. Patience, gentleness, and self-control are signs of a leader's capacity to self-differentiate while staying in touch with the feelings, needs, and aspirations of others. Kindness, generosity, and faithful integrity are also characteristics of self-differentiated leaders.

Leaders who are unsure where they leave off and where other people begin cannot collaborate effectively. Undifferentiated leaders who are anxious and emotionally reactive spread the contagion of reactivity and anxiety to everyone around them. Gospel partnerships, on the other hand, require two people who meet as equals. Partnership is not possible between fuzzy people who fuse one minute and then engage in emotional cut-offs in the next.

Differentiated leaders can form relationships. Undifferentiated leaders can only fuse or collide. Partnerships require appropriate self-disclosure, empathy for others, and the ability to give and receive emotionally significant information in ways that promote self-exploration rather than defensiveness. When the need to be separate and the need to be close are appropriately balanced, genuine partnership is possible.<sup>9</sup>

In order to maintain appropriate boundaries, the author not only did self-evaluation of her feelings throughout the process but also met consistently with her advisor. In meetings with Professor Clements, she was able to discuss potential boundary issues and

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas R. Hawkins, The Christian Small-Group Leader (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2001), 31.

appropriate ways to handle each situation. Having a person who one can reflect with and have as a support is imperative for the well-differentiated small group leader.

Once these things were taken account of, it was then time to get to the creative process of what kind of a group to develop and what the specifics of learning would become. The author can identify highly with a description of the creative process as outlined by Marlene LeFever.

Creativity depends on a five-step process. Knowing what happens in these steps can keep us from making mistakes that limit our creativity or from becoming frustrated because things aren't happening the way we think they should as we sweat and strain toward our goal. The steps in the process are: (1) preparation, (2) incubation, (3) illumination, (4) elaboration, and (5) verification.<sup>10</sup>

In reading information to develop the academic background illustrated in the first four chapters of this project, the author did a large amount of preparation. In the months it took to write the previous chapters and wrestle with the material, there was a long period of incubation. As the process for implementation began to come to life, the project became illuminated and able to bring into a practical, hands-on reality. The background efforts of explaining done in chapters three and four along with the plan enumerated in this chapter are the author's elaboration. Verification has also taken place before the project was implemented in conversations with advisors, during the class by its participants, and after by the evaluations of persons in the group and the author's own reflections.

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<sup>10</sup> Marlene D. LeFever, Creative Teaching Methods: Be an Effective Christian Teacher (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Ministry Resources, 1985), 23.

The next consideration needed in project development is the needs anticipated in practical implementation. A key to thinking about practical development of a small group is to use hospitality as one's guide.

Hospitality is an outward and visible manifestation of God's unconditional love. When we show hospitality, we mediate God's grace. Hospitality fosters a climate where the marks of Christian community become visible as signs and instruments of God's reign.

People find healing in hospitable settings. Although many people experience today's healthcare industry as cold and impersonal, hospitals were originally places of healing because they extended hospitality to their patients.<sup>11</sup>

Some people think the church used to be a more hospitable setting than it is today. In order to foster hospitality, however, one has to model hospitality. Some of the ways to model hospitality are by creating safe space, making a space physically inviting, setting feasible objectives, having explicit group norms, and modeling redeeming conversation.<sup>12</sup>

Creating a safe space is a primary objective in any group setting. For the small group associated with this project, several steps were taken in order to promote safe space. First, the space chosen was self-contained. Persons would not enter the room without intending to; therefore, only those who were supposed to be there would hear what went on inside the room. Second, all participants had to sign a consent form to be involved in the study. Outlined in the consent form was a statement regarding the author's commitment to confidentiality regarding what was shared in the group. Third, the participants were engaged in a discussion about the importance of confidentiality at the beginning of the first session. The expectation of keeping confidentiality was clearly specified, and all agreed to uphold this expectation. Fourth, persons were encouraged to

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<sup>11</sup> Hawkins, Christian Small Group Leader, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Hawkins, Christian Small Group Leader, 41-48.

respect one another, making sure that comments made or questions asked were for the edification of God and then each other.

When planning for the small group at Ojai UMC, the author had to consider what space would be appropriate. The library of the church is generally used as a meeting room; therefore, having the class in a familiar space had the benefit of potentially decreasing anxiety about the deep level of sharing the class required. Though there were other places to meet in the church, this room was identified with small group learning. It was also a space that was set aside so that persons would not walk through the library during a meeting. The seclusion of the library was important for both confidentiality and the silence needed for centering prayer. Inside the room, the number of tables was reduced to one so that participants could sit closer to one another to promote bonding. Snacks and drinks were provided and set on a table in the corner. In this way, the food was not intrusive, but hunger or thirst need not get in the way of learning. The library also had the bonus of its own air conditioner, which was needed during the warm Saturday weather. The space also had some of the most comfortable chairs in the church, and there was more than one type to choose from so that each person could be comfortable during the four-hour class time. Providing for the physical needs of the participants through nutrition, good chairs, comfortable environment, seclusion, and appropriate breaks all contributed to the feeling of hospitality the author tried to convey to the group.

The next piece related to hospitality to consider was the feasibility of the objectives. Certainly after reading and writing all that is needed in order to research a doctoral project, there was more than enough information to keep a group busy.

Unfortunately, busyness does not constitute effectiveness. In order to reach out to participants, different learning styles needed to be considered.

**Visual Learners:** These people respond well to charts, diagrams, and other visual stimuli. They tend to like handouts and enjoy parables and stories. They are visual thinkers; that is, they respond well to word pictures and to stories that are vivid and descriptive and allow them to “picture” what is happening. ...

**Auditory Learners:** Auditory learners enjoy learning by hearing. They would rather be in a discussion on an issue than read a book about it. Some of them may be avid readers, but in general, they would rather listen to a story than read one. ...

**Kinesthetic learners:** These folks like to touch and feel things. They like to participate in the action. They learn by doing. While a visual learner might be motivated to help the poor by seeing a picture of the poor in an issue of *Newsweek*, the kinesthetic learner would be motivated by a field trip to the inner city.<sup>13</sup>

The author recognized and planned for these learning styles in several ways. For visual learners, handouts were brought to every class with different pieces of information including the *Lectio Divina* text for the week, sensitizing questions for the autobiography topics, and empathetic listening handouts. For auditory learners, the class required a great deal of sharing and dialogue; additionally, the author took time to explain any necessary learning concepts verbally for participants each week. For kinesthetic learners, each week there was “homework” to practice by doing in their day-to-day setting. For example, using the skills they were learning in class, they were encouraged each week to try out their empathetic listening skills with persons they would normally talk with and then come and share their learning with the class.

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<sup>13</sup> Bill Donahue, *The Willow Creek Guide to Leading Life-Changing Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1996), 103-04.



The content of the class was modified to make it manageable to implement in a local church small group setting. Having worked with several local church small groups before, the author is highly aware of the importance of time management and timing. The core of the class was honed down to the following: lectio divina, centering prayer, guided spiritual autobiography, and teaching empathetic listening skills. There was a process of selecting which pieces of each of these would be able to be taught in a reasonable period of time. The author decided to open with lectio divina, share on one topic of autobiography with each person taking a turn, have a meal, share on another topic of the autobiography, teach about empathetic listening and practice, and then close with centering prayer. This schedule was notably advantageous, but the author felt it was important to include all pieces as fully as was reasonable so that persons could get the whole experience of listening to God, self, and other. Knowing the time restraints of average parishioners, the author decided that six sessions was a reasonable amount of time to ask participants to commit. Also, being aware of the liturgical calendar, the author started the group in late October in order to finish before Thanksgiving – after which it is notoriously difficult to get people to commit to any church project until January or February. Each participant was asked prior to the class starting about what day they would be available for the class so that everyone would be able to plan to attend every session. After some deliberation, six sessions were set up—five Saturdays and one after-church session on the Sunday after the fifth Saturday session.<sup>14</sup>

Hospitality is also offered in the group by setting explicit norms. In the first Saturday session, the expectations that had previously been discussed with each

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<sup>14</sup> For the class schedule, please see Appendix A.

participant were enumerated again in a more descriptive form. Respect, confidentiality, and the need for supportive, non-judgmental comments were all reiterated as necessary for nurturing the holistic group being created. In addition, the schedule was outlined to the participants at the beginning of the meetings. Care was taken to stay on schedule as much as possible, take breaks as scheduled, and end the sessions on time. Group members formed a covenant with one another to adhere to the expectations of attendance, participation, confidentiality, and respectfulness. All of these actions helped to make the normative behavior of the group clear.

Finally, hospitality is seen more evidently in redeeming conversations. The respectfulness requested of the group members had to be modeled by the group leader. The author tried to be very intentional about listening in the empathetic style she was teaching others. Also, she endeavored to speak lovingly and respectfully to all group members. Additionally, whenever respect or empathetic listening was shown by others in the group, the author gently and appropriately brought attention to the behavior utilizing positive reinforcement. For behaviors that may have been inappropriate, the conversation was redirected to the appropriate response when possible, the negative behavior was not emphasized, and a respectful example for learning was introduced into the dialogue.

Through this long and deliberate process, a class design was developed the author was comfortable with trying to implement. Centering herself in God through practicing the means of grace and creating an intentional space to evaluate her feelings and her own boundaries was the first step. Next, the author went through the calculated pieces of the creative process. Finally, all the elements of hospitality and practical needs of the group

were addressed. Now that all the preparation pieces were together, it was time to implement the plan.

### Implementation

The implementation of this group project is a story in relationship strengthening and community-building. Through the course of these six sessions, the author witnessed a bonding and trust-building process that was organic and powerful. Each group led through this process will be different, but the following paragraphs describe the development of relationship in this small group at Ojai UMC.

The class consisted of six sessions.<sup>15</sup> The first session was a three-hour introductory session. During this session, the participants were able to introduce themselves to one another through directed sharing. Additionally, the author took time to go through the expectations of the class again step by step. Each piece of the class was individually explained and questions were answered. During the entirety of the class, the concept of Godbearing in practice as evangelism was interweaved into the class content. Learning to be Godbearers for the sake of sharing the healing, loving presence of God as evidenced through Jesus Christ was both the undercurrent and the overriding theme.

Lectio Divina texts were handed out for the first week, and the group went through the instructions for lectio divina together and practiced it together.<sup>16</sup> Three different participants read the scripture. The first reading was one in which class members were encouraged to listen carefully to the text itself. The second reading was for participants to hear what the scripture was saying to them today, in this moment. The third reading elicited focus for our response to the text. In the final reading, the

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<sup>15</sup> For class schedule, please see Appendix A.

<sup>16</sup> For Lectio Divina guides, please see Appendix B.

participants were taught to rest in the scripture and let it live in them and through them for the rest of the day. Class members were instructed to continue this practice at home each day with the text handed out to them for that week. Each session, the author opened the class with *lectio divina* by reading together with the group the text for the week in the same manner as described above. Before the readings, the class got opportunities to share what the Spirit had taught them through the scriptures during their devotional time that week. After each week's reading, participants were given another opportunity to share what they heard in the new scripture for the week, giving them thoughts to ponder as they continued their readings in the coming days.

Guided spiritual autobiography was also described thoroughly in the first week's session. The first two topics' sensitizing questions were handed out to the class, and the group was given the opportunity to look over the questions.<sup>17</sup> Participants were informed that each week, two topics would be discussed with the group. During the week prior to the next class, each member would take the questions into consideration and write a statement about some of their answers to these questions to share with the group. The shared document for class was to be two pages or less, mainly for time purposes. The class was informed that no one needed to share anything they were uncomfortable sharing, but to be as transparent and open as they felt was possible for them. All of the questions did not have to be answered, but each person was to use the sheet of questions as a guide to help their thought process in preparation for the next week. Over the course of the next four sessions, eight topics would be discussed, ranging from family history and life work to sexual history and perspectives on death. Confidentiality and the

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<sup>17</sup> For Sensitizing Questions for Guided Spiritual Autobiography, please see Appendix C.

importance of safe space were reinforced concepts during this time of sharing each meeting.

Centering prayer was both explained and practiced during our first week's session, continuing with practice each session thereafter. Using the guidance found from Thomas Keating's books as described in chapter four, class members were instructed on the basic structure of intentional centering prayer. Each member was encouraged to take twenty minutes two times per day and devote that time to centering prayer. The time chosen needed to be a time that was not likely to be interrupted, in a relatively quiet space, and at a time where one was neither too hungry or too tired. It was explained to the group that centering prayer was a time of intentional listening for God, putting aside all of our thoughts and worries and creating an inner silence for the presence of the Eternal to fill with love and peace. Centering prayer is about becoming one with the Divine, not about bringing to God your wants and desires for this temporal life. Participants were directed to let thoughts pass by and let go of each of them as they allowed their mind and soul to become quiet and receptive to God's spirit. They were not to try not to think, for that would only cause them to think on those things more. Instead, they were to simply acknowledge the thought and move on, using a sacred word to redirect them back to their intention of centering prayer. They could pick any sacred word, but two syllable words that described their intention but did not cause too much emotional attachment worked best. Examples such as "holy", "amen", "Jesus", and "God" were given as starter words. Centering prayer was described as the intentional developing of relationship with God on God's terms rather than ours. By becoming one with the divine, we could then hope to see the world more from God's perspective, seeing

the world we now experience in black and white with all the colors of God's glory revealed more clearly to us. Each session included centering prayer at the close of the group, and members were reminded of the importance of intentional time with God as the grounding force of love supporting everything else we do.

Empathetic listening skills were developed over the course of the class. During the first session, the listening self-evaluation was handed out for members to complete by the next session.<sup>18</sup> Starting with self-evaluation, the class was able to begin thinking about how well they listen to others. When reviewing the self-evaluation the following week, attention was not brought to particular scores. Members were instructed to think about the ranking they had for each question. Then, they were guided to work from wherever they were at the time to becoming better listeners by learning their own strengths and weaknesses. Listening was not a competition, and the purpose of the class was not to see who was the best listener. Rather, wherever one started on the listening scale, it was hoped through the course of the time of the class and beyond, they would improve. To that end, materials were used that described the process of empathetic listening during sessions two and three. Handouts were given to the group for reference and review at home as needed. From session three until the end of the class, participants were asked to practice their learning of empathetic listening skills with those in their daily lives. Then, they would bring examples of that experience back and share it with the class. Over time, these examples became increasingly personal, profound, and helpful to the other class participants in their learning process.

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<sup>18</sup> For Empathetic Listening materials, please see Appendix D.

There were many observations of growth during the class that particularly interested the author. The first observation was the healing and support developed over the six sessions. The nurturing nature of the group no doubt highly contributed to this process, as many central pastoral care issues came to the forefront over time. Due to the personal nature of sharing such a large amount of one's story with others, there was an increasing depth and vulnerability that naturally occurred. Such pastoral care issues as self-esteem or self-worth, life transitions and challenges, loss and pain, forgiveness and repentance, and the layers of each person's personality all came through clearly during the class. There are many examples of these issues, but for the purposes of brevity the author will list only some of the most pertinent.

At the beginning of the class, the author notes that most of the sharing in conversation seemed to be about finding common ground. For example, in the first session, reflection on the scripture passage read in *lectio divina* style led the discussion from "I will not leave you orphans" to how God will help in times of economic crisis. As discussed in Chapter 2, the importance of economic fairness and health are strongly connected. During these uncertain times in the global economy, seeing the text as speaking to God's provision was common ground for the class members to rally together around. The economy was only one issue of social justice that managed to find its way into the conversation over the course of the class. As the class built stronger relationships, however, the topics moved from the "safer" topic of the collapsing economy to the "riskier" topics, such as overturning Proposition 8 in California and feelings about homosexuality.

There was quite a bit of discussion that centered on self-worth and self-image. When people began to tell their life stories, what was important to them and their core values began to be visible to the group. In some cases, their stories centered around the literal living of their core values. For example, one of the participants who believed strongly in doing all the good one can do in the world had a life history that illustrated this belief in a variety of ways. The same participant had been involved with many social justice issues over time including leading a union and working for worker's health benefits, being on a city council, teaching in the inner city, and being politically active throughout life. The group affirmed the contributions of this member in many ways, which further affirmed the member's contributions to society over a lifetime and increased self-worth. In other cases, there were instances where persons evidenced struggle with values and personal goals. One member had life goals shifted dramatically after a sports accident in high school that resulted in a serious knee injury. Rather than be able to pursue more athletic personal goals for the future as planned, the member had to re-evaluate life goals and choose a different path. The same member is still uncertain where the road ahead leads, but is only sure that many more changes are likely to come.

As layers of trust deepened, the layers of personal revelation got deeper also. In some cases, there was sharing that took place in the group that had not taken place at any other time in persons' lives. The presenting statements heard during the first weeks were later understood much more clearly after the person was able to share more deeply.

Three examples are good illustrations for this concept.

Member "A" had a difficult time with organized religion. The presenting statements at the beginning of the class were clearly questioning whether Ojai UMC was



the right church for the member to be attending. At first, the reasons for this were stated as being a lack of things in common with the other congregation members, lack of social justice opportunities, and decreasing numbers of new people—particularly younger persons. However, when Member “A” was sharing more personal thoughts, it became evident there was a lot of hurt surrounding the church and pastors’ neglect of the member and spouse. The member was a full-time caregiver for their spouse and no pastor or church member had visited or sent a card in the six years Member “A” had been caring for the spouse. This neglect was a source of great pain and loneliness. The needs of the member were obviously not being met. Through this revelation, it became clear there were much deeper issues causing the feelings of disconnect and unhappiness with the church than simply lack of people or programs.

Member “B” was a quiet, introverted person by nature. It took several weeks for member “B” to be able to really begin to open up to the group, even then it was with great struggle as it worked against the member’s normal personality. However, by the time the group got to the topic of health, this member had been able to open up enough to talk about the challenge of being a caregiver at home. Up until this point, there had been no mention of caregiving from the member, not to mention hardly any mention of home life at all. Suddenly, there was a moment where the member acknowledged that self-care was a challenge, asking for help was difficult, and there seemed to be no easy answer to the difficulties of home life. It was a challenge for this member to ask for help from anyone, and certainly a courageous act for the member to share this need with the group. The group listened, supported, and tried to empower the member to consider using this opportunity to find ways where the member could reach out for help where needed,

offering others the opportunity to love the member through service even as the member spent so much of life helping others.

Member “C” had always had a problem with funerals, but had never mentioned to anyone the reason. When the member was a child of preschool age, the member was taken to a funeral of someone unknown to the family, in a room crowded with people, and felt forced to be in a situation that was traumatically uncomfortable. The member had been uncomfortable with death and funerals ever since. Member “C” had never told anyone about this, not even the parent who had taken the member to the funeral. Revealing this level of hurt to the group was just the first step to claiming a beginning step to healing, albeit still having a long way to go down that path. This kind of revelation became more common over the course of the group process and is evidence to the genuineness of openness in sharing that developed.

One of the noticeable developments was the transition occurring that demonstrated increased depth of relationship also increased depth of theological sharing. As has already been stated above, the beginning of theological discussion within the group was a process of finding common ground—like in the discussion about God’s provision related to the economy. However, as time went on, the questions related to scripture began to get more intense and specific to each person’s particular situation. Some persons even went so far as to look up different versions of the text or exegete the scripture at home. One example of this is when a member of the group had questions about the Job passage we read together from chapter 42. The member went home and took out the book by Henrietta Mears, What the Bible is All About, in order to answer the question. The member found illumination about the passage in Mears’ description

regarding Job's repentance in dust and ashes, "This is the only place to learn God's lessons—on your face with your mouth shut!"<sup>19</sup> This beginning explanation of repentance spurred a genuine, lively discussion on the topic which all seemed to benefit from sharing.

Near the end of the class sessions, participants were asked to discern and share their thoughts on God's listening nature. One of the member's answers to this question illustrates the thoughtfulness in sharing that became common during theological discussion.

I suppose I see God as both the eye and the ear of the universe. I think that he listens to every thought/word/prayer and unspoken gesture fully. When I think of God being able to hear everything, I think of Him hearing our will and vice-versa he gives us the same ability to hear his. Of course, he has a greater plan for us that our will may not always agree with. Consequently, we don't always use the same ears that God uses for us. We don't always listen to or for God, but he always listens to and for us. There is great humility that goes along with God listening to us. The idea that this Supreme Being, God, takes such great interest in everything we do and that he listens to all we have to say or think or do is very humbling.

Then of course as we discuss empathetic listening it forces you to think back to all of those "ah-hah" moments that you have had while deep in thought. Was that God mirroring what we had to say so we could hear it? There is also a sense of great strength in this. For if God listens to all you say, and he mirrors, that would mean those thoughts that were long contemplated might just be the will of God. This however, leads to a whole host of other questions. I would definitely question the idea of knowing what God wants.

Then you look outside of just yourself, to that whole universe. What if God does listen to every single word/thought/prayer/unspoken gesture with the same intensity for all? How much lighter our load to carry, how much less lonely we would feel, and how much better we would listen for his response. Transversely, how heavy God's load to bear, how amazing and indescribable He is. How much joy and pain He must feel. But what

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<sup>19</sup> Henrietta Mears, What the Bible is All About (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light Publishers, 1953), 180.

if we ALL knew that he listened and took the time to listen for his response? What would the world sound and look like?<sup>20</sup>

This level of theological reasoning was welcome and natural in the group by the fourth week when it was shared. The author was encouraged by the thoughtfulness and time spent developing this concept of God's listening, tying in some of the concepts taught in the class throughout the explanation. In the same discussion, another member called to attention the use of the masculine pronoun for God and expressed distaste for the ignoring of the feminine nature of God. In fact, the member stated, "What if *she* is black?" This member then went on to discuss different understandings of God and evangelism from the traditional western understanding, including a story of the tried and failed "Christianization" of the Hopi Indians, who eventually went back to their understanding of God as seen through nature. Another member added that one difficult thing to understand was God having to listen to people praying about war. The member stated this had always been a challenge to understand because the member does not believe that God wants war, nor does God take sides in a war. Therefore, how does God listen to that? This question spurred another lively discussion regarding current events and questions about God's role in today's wars, in particular the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the closing sessions, there was discussion about various other questions regarding the texts. In the text from John 15, questions were asked about the love of Jesus being conditional. This comment was raised after reading, "You are my friends if you do what I command."<sup>21</sup> In the Matthew 28 text, someone noted that even among the

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<sup>20</sup> Taken from written sheet turned in by a member during session four.

<sup>21</sup> John 15:14

people who were worshipping Christ, some doubted. This was comforting to more than one member of the group due to the struggles they have had with faith and doubt.

Another noticeable development within the group was their increasing grasp of empathetic listening and how that relates to evangelism. In the early sessions, the author had discussed with the group how listening showed love to others, developed genuine caring relationships, and showed persons you valued them for who they really are. Thus, one ends up increasing both the other person's feeling of self worth and one's own feeling of self worth as well. Empathetic listening is a loving gift that one can offer to another which cannot be forced; however, when it is graciously given, can be both life affirming and transformative in nature.

The author also stated that building the relationship is the first step, not the last. Members were encouraged to share their faith story with others when it can be done in loving, natural ways. Participants were told sharing about one's faith is a privilege and should be for the edification of God through love of other and self. NOT sharing about the difference one's faith has made in one's life can be cruel, if by withholding one could help another by genuinely sharing the knowledge of one's own faith journey.

Evangelism is not proselytizing—it is about sharing the good news of abundant life, healing, and love. Jesus listened, healed, and reached out to those on the margins. We, as Christ-followers today, should reach out in similar ways. When one is comfortable in one's own faith journey, one can listen to others and share appropriately so that one can appreciate the faith journey of the other and grow and learn with them in the process.

There was a lot of discussion about empathetic listening during the class. Persons in the class came in with many examples of listening and how they were practicing their

empathetic listening skills outside of class. Some used their skills to enable their children to talk to them more openly than before, others practiced their skills with their spouse and extended family, and still others talked about how listening can be helpful in one's job when dealing with people. The author's favorite story of listening-based evangelism, however, is the following story.

One of the members was talking with a family member, who was not a religious person, about scripture. The family member told Member "D" that scripture was problematic because it was too black and white, leaving out the nuances found in life. Member "D" then proceeded to lovingly tell the member about how the class had been practicing something called "lectio divina". The member asked the relative to read the passage for the week. After the relative had completed the reading, the member asked, "What do you think it says?" The relative replied to the question and the member encouraged the relative to read the passage again. After the second reading the member asked again, "Now what do you think it says?" The relative answered differently than the first time. Then, the member asked, "Do you still think it is black and white? I've been doing lectio divina for this class for weeks now, and I find something different in the scriptures every day. Maybe you could try it too and let me know what you think."

After this story, the author took the opportunity to reiterate the beauty of the connection between listening and evangelism. This story was a great example of Godbearing in practice, using listening as an avenue for genuine faith-sharing in love. Several points of listening-based evangelism were enumerated clearly during the ensuing discussion. The member's sharing was a good example of listening-based evangelism for at least four reasons: 1. The member shared a faith story with someone with whom a

relationship was already established. 2. The member shared during an appropriate time and setting which was conducive to a caring discussion. 3. The member spoke from the member's own faith experience. 4. The member shared with the relative for the right reason—love and compassion for another.

While there are many other pieces of stories that could be shared from the sessions, these are among the most pertinent for this project as illustrations. Through building trusting, open relationships, the group was able to share in healing, affirming ways with one another. As the sharing increased, so did the theological depth and struggle for understanding their own relationship with God, especially as it relates to listening. The group also ventured out into the world practicing empathetic listening with others, even trying out listening-based evangelism for themselves. These pieces of the implementation were both encouraging and challenging for the author, who continues to be thankful for this project and such a wonderful experience.

### Evaluation

While the author's evaluation was ongoing and evidenced in part through the description of the implementation process, there was also a self-evaluation tool given to class members immediately before the first class session and immediately after the last session.<sup>22</sup> Using this tool, one can see a variety of responses and understandings of how the class affected the participants and in what areas. In the following tables and paragraphs, these evaluations will be reviewed and discussed. Members' names will not be given for confidentiality purposes, but responses will be shared. The author developed an evaluation based on the goals of the class consisting of seven "I" statements. The

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<sup>22</sup> For the pre and post-evaluation tool used, please see Appendix E.

participants were to circle their identification with the statement on a Likert scale with “1” being those things that do not apply to them and “5” representing statements that apply all the time.<sup>23</sup> They were also encouraged to write a response underneath the statement about why they circled the number that they did.

Statement 1:

“I feel God’s presence deeply and am confident of God’s love for me.”

Participant A:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 3	Likert Scale: 4
No comment	“I am more confident of God’s love after experiencing this group meeting.”

Participant B:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 4	Likert Scale: 4
“I prefer the term Supreme Being.”	“I prefer the term “supreme being” and feel it shows in many ways.”

Participant C:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 4	Likert Scale: 5
“I feel like many times I forget this during the more trying moments of my life, but I do attempt to remind myself.”	“I do know God loves me and am beginning to be aware of his presence in all that I do.”

Participant D:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 4	Likert Scale: 4

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<sup>23</sup> Likert scale was 1 = does not apply to me, 2 = applies only occasionally, 3 = applies some of the time, 4 = applies most of the time, 5 = applies all of the time



“Not all the time”	“My experience in this class has helped me realize the importance of God’s love for me.”
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Statement 2:

“I listen intently for God and seek ways to show God’s love to others.”

Participant A:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 4	Likert Scale: 4
“In dealing with all the different personalities in my ministry at the church, I try to show God’s compassion. Ministry requires teamwork so we need harmonious relations in our work.” <sup>24</sup>	“I need improvement in this area.”

Participant B:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 5	Likert Scale: 4
“This should be the goal of all religions”	“Peace and good will should be the main mission of the church. I work on this every day.”

Participant C:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 3	Likert Scale: 4
“I do not always listen for God and in fact avoid doing so. I do always try to show love to others, but not always in the context of “God’s love.”	“This I feel differently about now. I am beginning to listen more to God. I also feel I am beginning to be more confident in expressing God’s love to others.”

Participant D:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 3	Likert Scale: 4

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<sup>24</sup> Details of ministries and identifying references have been changed for confidentiality purposes.

"Need improvement in this respect"	"I do try to relay to others the power of God's love."
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Statement 3:

"I know the inherent value of my life and feel I am unique and special."

Participant A:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 5	Likert Scale: 5
"I am aware of my talents, and choose to direct them to enhancing our services. I volunteer my talents to the church."	"I know my leadership in ministry is valuable in this congregation and community."

Participant B:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 4	Likert Scale: 4
"This has changed as I have grown older"	"I have led a good life but have great challenges today in my personal life and my relation to others."

Participant C:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 3	Likert Scale: 5
"I feel that knowing my inherent value means knowing my purpose. I don't feel that this can occur until questions 1 and 2 are met. I do, however, feel special and unique."	"I do feel God is using me for work in this world and that I am designed especially for what that purpose is."

Participant D:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 4	Likert Scale: 3
No comment	"I do need reinforcement at times to appreciate this fact."

Statement 4:

“I am knowledgeable of my strengths and weaknesses and know how to use them to help others.”

Participant A:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 4	Likert Scale: 5
No comment	“Years of experience have done this.”

Participant B:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 4	Likert Scale: 4
“I try to follow the word of John Wesley and do as much good as I can...etc.”	“I follow the words of John Wesley. I try to do good to all in all ways possible as often as possible, etc.”

Participant C:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 3	Likert Scale: 4
“I am always finding strengths and weaknesses and am always striving to help others and myself. However, I do not know all the answers.”	“I know many of them, but I am sure there are many more I have not learned.”

Participant D:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 3	Likert Scale: 3
“Need more work on this”	“Need more work on this concept, due to lack of self-confidence”

Statement 5:

“I am able to put self aside in order to listen empathetically to others.”

Participant A:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 4	Likert Scale: 4
No comment	"I need improvement in listening empathetically."

Participant B:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 3	Likert Scale: 3
"Not if they support George Bush and his policies"	"I am working on this"

Participant C:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 4	Likert Scale: 4
"This I have found to be one of my strengths, but it does depend on what you define listening as. I see listening as the ability not only to hear what is being said, but also the processing and meaningful response that must be accompanied."	"Getting better. I feel I am for the most part a good listener but this class has given me new skills to work on."

Participant D:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 2	Likert Scale: 3
"Not always sure of myself"	"Need to stop and listen more intently"

Statement 6:

"I help others to strengthen their own spiritual journeys by listening without needing to compare their journey to my own."

Participant A:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 4	Likert Scale: 3
No comment	No comment

Participant B:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 3	Likert Scale: 2
"This has not been a part of my life"	"I just don't do this"

Participant C:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 2	Likert Scale: 4
"This one is tough for me. Part of how I make sense of the journey of others is by relying on my own experiences or others I have heard. I can only think of a few times I did not compare."	"I still do compare, but I am working on it! I am trying to really just focus on the individual who needs to be listened to and not focus solely on my needs."

Participant D:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 2	Likert Scale: 3
"Need more work on this"	"Need to practice on this subject"

Statement 7:

"I feel comfortable in my role as an evangelist."

Participant A:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 4	Likert Scale: 5
No comment	"I am not self-conscious about sharing my faith."

## Participant B:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 2	Likert Scale: 2
"I am not comfortable with organized religion these days."	"By example only. I don't try to convert anyone."

## Participant C:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 2	Likert Scale: 3
"Rarely outside of church am I comfortable with this role. I am comfortable with this role when around my spouse as well. However, in my day-to-day work life and family life, definitely not. I have always been taught to not talk about God and consequently I have a lot of work to do before I will be comfortable."	"Still not 100% confident, but am working on trying to help others by showing them God's love without having to directly state it."

## Participant D:

Pre-Class	Post-Class
Likert Scale: 2	Likert Scale: 3
"Need more self-confidence"	"I will try to do better on listening so I can be an evangelist. The class has given me some confidence that I can do this."

The data posted in the charts above has several notable characteristics. One of the most noticeable differences is the movement both up and down the Likert scale from pre-class and post-class evaluations. The movement in both directions the author attributes to increasing self-awareness and varied responses to change. As participants became more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, the awareness of how much they would need to change behaviors had a variety of responses. In some cases, the member only needed the tools to implement changes, being excited about the possibility

of learning something new or different. In others, change was seen as a part of life, but not necessarily something to be embraced in this way at this time. As in all classes, participants have the right to use the information to apply to their own lives or simply learn about a method they have not thought of before as an intellectual exercise. While the author hoped for the former, to take away the possibility of the latter is a form of manipulation and disempowerment of the student; therefore, it is not a tactic or strategy implemented in the author's teaching methods.

In all participants there was an evident learning in each area. Some members were strengthened in their prior inclinations and understandings. In these cases, Likert scores did not change and persons reiterated prior convictions. Yet other members were challenged by concepts in such a way that prior convictions were reevaluated. In some of these instances, the move was made from a higher self-evaluative score to a lower number, realizing that perhaps they were not as strong in a particular area as previously believed. Members then expressed a desire to work to better their practice in that area. Due to the facts that learning and change clearly occurred, members thoughtfully and sincerely participated in the entire project, and differences over time can be clearly noted in the evaluation, the author is confident the class was a successful group study, whether or not each objective was met in the way the author might have hoped.

Also evident is the fact this scale is not comprehensive. Through the comments on the evaluation tool, the reader is given glimpses of the changes elicited by this study. Combined with the analysis done in the implementation section as reviewed above, persons who are reviewing this project should be able to get a more holistic picture of the progress made. A more thorough questionnaire would possibly have solicited a more

complete response for each subject. However, the author remains satisfied with the evaluation as given for two reasons. First, there is a natural intimidation and anxiety that is tangible in feel when giving an evaluation for persons to complete. Anything longer might have been too overwhelming for all of the participants to feel comfortable filling out. Second, the basic questions of the study were all addressed in the evaluation, giving a subjective glimpse into each area from the member's point of view. Evaluation has started by the answers given to these statements. Concurrently, evaluation will be ongoing as the effects of the class take root in future months. To discuss these effects, we turn now to follow-up.

### Follow Up

Any class or teaching is only as effective as the quality of the learning and its impact on persons' lives. In the latter weeks of the class, the author began the process of developing incentives for apprenticeship. The value of apprenticeship has been long appreciated. One example is as follows:

The vitality and effectiveness of any local church is directly related to the quality of its leadership. The meta-church small group model emphasizes the ongoing development of leaders in the body. It is the responsibility of the church to identify and develop new leaders so that the mission of the Gospel can be accomplished and so that people can be shepherded. Jesus modeled this with the twelve disciples, and Paul exhorted Timothy to do the same (2 Tim. 2:2).

We...are firm believers in the Ephesians 4:12 concept of mobilizing and building up the body of Christ so that each member can accomplish the ministry God has given him or her. Remember, the Gospel is always one generation away from extinction. It is the duty and privilege of all small group leaders to train up a new generation of leaders and to pass the baton effectively. The future hangs in the balance. So work together as a team...to continue to raise up new leaders for service in the kingdom.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Donahue, Willow Creek Guide, 67.



As participants got more engaged in the small group and excited about the process, comments naturally emerged that new small groups should form. When these comments came forth, the author took the opportunity to encourage the members to consider leading a group of their own. This was easier to do than in some other small group settings due to the fact that three out of the four participants were professional educators. At this time, one of the participants has already shown strong interest in beginning a new group. The author has assured all members that anyone who wishes to start a group would have her full support, being willing to mentor them through the process of leading the group and provide materials as needed. It is important to stand with those who want to start a new group for many reasons. From a pastoral care perspective, persons need someone to talk with and support as they meet the challenges of a new ministry. From an academic perspective, it is helpful to have someone who has already researched and taught a subject to be a resource person for a new teacher. From an evangelistic perspective, listening to and walking with the person who is seeking to lead others in becoming listening-based evangelists is a mainstay of the entire project!

In addition to developing apprentices, the author will also continue to follow up with persons who have taken the class. The author will listen to their continued learning as they put Godbearing into practice, and encourage them to pursue listening-based evangelism more each day. As others learn about the class or have questions about deepening relationships and community by listening-based evangelism, the author will be open to leading workshops, teaching in different settings, or possibly even leading another group like the one explained in this project. The concept of listening-based evangelism is one that is still in process, and the author will continue to pursue different

and better ways to implement these teachings. Regardless of how they are implemented in the future, however, the concepts and values espoused in this chapter remain a passion of the author's and will continue to be developed.

## CHAPTER 6

### Conclusion

Throughout our lives we are constantly learning. How we learn and what we do with the learning is a choice we are given many opportunities to make. One can live a life where life constantly tries to teach lessons and one never learns them, but is only doomed to repeat mistakes and failures repeatedly. Or one can live a life filled with openness and a desire for growth and transformation. This project attempts to assist persons in the latter form of learning.

Openness to possibilities and creativity are assumptions made in this dissertation. Without these two elements, none of the rest of the learning in this project is possible. The reason for these assumptions is based upon the understanding that God is a creative God who is the source of all possibilities. God who created all that is in existence is still creating today. It is up to each of us to choose whether or not we wish to work with God in all that God is already working to accomplish. God, who wills for the good of all creation, is calling us to participate in this work, learning with an intention to grow and be transformed by the process. As Christians, we have the opportunity and responsibility to commit our lives to being transformed by the Spirit and helping to create with God the kingdom of God in the world.

In order to create the kingdom of God in the world, we must seek not only to transform ourselves, but also the world. This transformation is not ours to control, as we have seen some try to do over the years by using power and coercion to force others to their way of understanding mission, the Church, and faith. The transformation we seek to

encourage is one that makes the world a more loving and just place by lessening the suffering of others, celebrating with their joys and successes, and offering true relationship by valuing the spiritual journey of another even as we would have them value us. In this way, transformation is never merely a one-way venture. We are transformed in the process of helping others to be transformed by the Spirit. The openness we have to others along with a sincere depth of love enables us to learn and grow from every experience and relationship in amazing ways.

The diversity around us that is easily seen in each person is a gift of God. God did not make persons the same, and we should not expect everyone to be just like us. The uniqueness of every individual is both a gift and a challenge to learn about God in a way that we have not learned before. In this way, we can learn openly about those who are more like us—Christians from our own cultural perspective and background. Yet with equal measure we are also free to learn from those who are not at all like us—persons from different faiths, cultural perspectives, and backgrounds. In both cases, we are called to be gracious sharers of God’s love modeled to us through the person of Jesus. And, even as Jesus reached out to those who were not like him, not from the same religion or perspective or background, we can follow his model by being fully human and healthy ourselves, reaching out to others in holistic ways.

One of the greatest gifts of love we can offer is the gift of listening. In listening, we are saying to the other person that they are valuable and worthy of our love and respect. True listening can never be forced, but it can always be offered. While it does not cost us anything monetarily to give the gift of listening, it does cost us some

significant things: our pride, our need to be right, our feelings of superiority, and our need to control. The rewards of giving this gift, however, are greater than the cost by far.

If we are to be followers of Christ, who lived as fully human an existence as anyone who has ever lived, we must be committed to claiming our full humanity and helping others to do the same. We must dare to get to know ourselves and confront those things within us that need to be overcome in order to grow. Allowing the Divine to heal us through becoming one with the Eternal through centering prayer and daring to review our own life histories by ourselves and with others are two ways to do this which have been shown to be helpful in this paper. Our own transformation is not enough by itself, however. If we are honestly transformed into what God is creating us to be, we will not be satisfied with being there alone. We must also work to transform the world so that others may also have the opportunity to be fully human and reach their God-given potential as well.

Godbearing is key to the transformation of ourselves and the world. By offering God's love to a hurting world, we are living examples of grace and compassion. The needs of the world are many and the challenges are difficult to overcome, but no needs will be met or challenges overcome without there being love and care shared with each other. No one can change the world to a more just place by walking alone. When we dare to focus on others rather than ourselves with an intention to share God's love and do God's will, we dare to make the world a better place for all. None need suffer alone for we have one another to share burdens together. None need celebrate alone for we have one another to share the joy and happiness of life together as well. We were created to be unique but also to be part of a global community. We only need to develop healthy ways

to be engaged in lovingkindness with others in that community in order to bring more harmony to a world often wracked with discord.

The concepts enumerated in this paper are simple but also make a profound difference when practiced. Take time to be with God and listen to what the Spirit has to say. Be honest with yourself and seek to be healthy and whole in all you do. Reach out to others in a spirit of true Christian love, daring to value them for who they are—learning from them even as they may also learn from you. In other words, love God, love yourself, and love your neighbor. The hope of this project is that, in some small way, these three things have become a little better practiced through implementation of the learning found within its pages. The purpose of this project was to make Godbearing a little more practical, sharing the journey of Godbearing with a few others along the way by practicing centering prayer, spiritual autobiography, and empathetic listening.

The project is not an all-inclusive look at how to be Godbearers in the world. It seeks to find a few practical ways to begin the process. The author believes the mission of the project as written was accomplished, at least to an extent. No six-session class is going to encapsulate all one needs to know to live the Godbearing life or be the perfect listening-based evangelist. However, it is a beginning. And as with any beginning, there is much more of the story yet to be written.

In the future, the author would like to try different variations of this project to see if any of those would work better. The project as it is now could be easily implemented in other Christian churches with very little modification. It could even be used to start dialogue with interfaith communities by using scriptures for Lectio Divina from different faiths, including Christianity but not limited to simply the Christian faith. The author,

however, is coming from a Christian perspective and would prefer for the project to be used to further the love and message of Jesus as illustrated throughout the paper. There are many things the author could have included in the group implementation that had to be left out due to time constraints, and she wonders how things may have been different with more emphases on different sections or if presented in a slightly different style. These questions will be answered in time. For now, the author is grateful for this opportunity to share the love of Christ, excited about the learning experienced in herself and others, and hopeful that through empathetic listening, God's love can be shown in ways that help others to be healed, whole, and fully live an abundant life.

## Appendix A

### Class Outline for Listening Based Evangelism

#### Listening to God, self, and other through prayer, spiritual autobiography, and improved listening skills

##### Session One

30 minutes – Completion of Pre-Class Evaluation Tool

20-30 minutes – Guided group discussion on class outline

Answering questions thought of post-orientation

Forming a Group Covenant based on Clinebell's group principles

20 minutes – Description of Lectio Divina and reading of week one text

15 minutes – Description of first autobiographical session and sensitizing questions

1-1 ½ hrs – Discussion on Empathetic Listening and practice exercises

10 minutes – Centering Prayer

##### Sessions Two-Five

5 minutes – Gathering

20 minutes – Lectio Divina

1 hour – Sharing of Spiritual Autobiography statements – Topic One

30 minutes – Lunch

1 hour – Sharing of Spiritual Autobiography statements – Topic Two

1 hr – Discussion of Empathetic Listening, review of skills, new practice materials

10 minutes – Centering Prayer

##### Session Six

5 minutes – Gathering

10 minutes – Lectio Divina



30 minutes – Forming our personal covenants from this point related to listening based  
evangelism/Godbearing: Sharing closing thoughts

15 minutes – Sharing Communion and Sending Forth

10 minutes – Centering Prayer

## Appendix B

### Lectio Divina Guides

#### Instructions for Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is a traditional form of Christian prayer that is focused on reading the scriptures and listening to what God may want to reveal through the text. The term *lectio divina* means “sacred reading” and is focused on being intentional about receiving what Word God wishes to share at that moment.<sup>1</sup> The process for practicing *lectio divina* is fairly simple, but also quite profound in experience. There are four parts to the process.

*Read (lectio):* Read the story that is told in God’s word. Be present to the Word. Listen to it for information. Digest it. Absorb it.

*Reflect (meditatio):* Become actively involved with the story. Pay attention to what attracts your attention. Notice your own feelings. Reflect on your own inner experience of the scripture. Allow the Gospel (or other text) to be a mirror of your own life.

*Respond (oratio):* Be free to express what is pouring out of the reflection—praise, tears, repentance, thanksgiving, and so on. How is God becoming formed in you? Celebrate this with acceptance.

*Rest (complatio):* Let go of all reflections and responses in order to allow God to speak to you in the mystery of silence and quiet presence. Surrender to the mystery.<sup>2</sup>

By reading the scriptures with these things in mind, there is a deep richness that evolves as one experiences the message of God in a personal way. Through listening, reflecting, responding, and resting in God’s presence, the person who practices *lectio divina* creates an intentional space for the Holy Spirit to speak uniquely to his/her needs.

#### Lectio Divina Session 1

John 14 (NIV)

15“If you love me, you will obey what I command. 16And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever— 17the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. 18I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. 19Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live,

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Butler, “Lectio Divina as a Tool for Discernment,” in The Divine Indwelling Centering Prayer and Its Development, by Thomas Keating, et. al. (New York: Lantern Books, 2001), 25.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah A. Butler, 26.

you also will live. **20**On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. **21**Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him."

### Lectio Divina Session 2

#### Ephesians 2 (NIV)

**14**For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, **15**by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, **16**and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. **17**He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. **18**For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

**19**Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, **20**built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. **21**In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. **22**And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

### Lectio Divina Session 3

#### Job 42 (NIV)

#### Job

**1** Then Job replied to the LORD :

**2** "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.

**3** You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand: things too wonderful for me to know.

**4** "You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak, I will question you, and you shall answer me.'

**5** My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.

**6** Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

## Lectio Divina Session 4

## Mark 12 (NIV)

## The Greatest Commandment

28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

32 "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 33 To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

34 When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

## Lectio Divina Session 5

## John 15 (NIV)

## The Vine and the Branches

9 "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10 If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. 12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command. 15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. 17 This is my command: Love each other.

## Lectio Divina Session 6

## Matthew 28 (NIV)

## The Great Commission

16Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. 17When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

## Appendix C

### Sensitizing Questions for Guided Autobiography

#### Sensitizing Questions for First Small Group Meeting Part One<sup>3</sup>

##### Major Branching Points in My Life

1. About how old were you at the time of the branching point? Place the turning point along a time line. The timing of an event is often very important. Did it happen too soon? Were you too young? Did it happen too late? Were you too old?
2. Significant people?  
Who were the important people involved in the turning point? – father, mother, spouse, Sunday School teacher, child, scout leader, friend, pastor, teacher, coach? – you alone? Often one notices that the same people are involved again and again in major life turning points.
3. What were your emotions and feelings at that time? How intense were these feelings? Sometimes our feelings in reaction to an experience are mixed or are changeable. Do not be concerned if your feelings seem contradictory or inconsistent over time. Life is contradictory and inconsistent.
4. What are your emotions and feelings now?  
Sometimes our feelings change over time. Something that seemed like a disaster when it happened may turn out to be a positive event later on and vice versa. What emotions do you experience as you think about the turning point now?
5. How did the branching point challenge or enhance your meaning making at the time that it occurred? How does the branching point challenge or enhance your meaning making now?
6. How did your faith speak to or intertwine with the branching point?
7. Looking back from your current vantage point in life, what were the spiritual dimensions of your branching point? Did you see these dimensions at the time of the branching point? Why or why not?
8. What was the role of personal choice in the turning point? How much personal control did you have? Was the branching point completely out of your control? Who or what was the external influence?

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<sup>3</sup> All questions are based from a combination of questions from James E. Birren and Donna E. Deutchman, Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults: Exploring the Fabric of Life (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) and from William Clements' class "Autobiography in the Context of Pastoral Care and Counseling for the Second Half of Life" at Claremont School of Theology.

9. What were the consequences?

Branching points are branching points because they change our lives in one or more important ways. In your view what are the ways your life was changed because of this branching point? What effect, impact, consequences did it have on your life? How did this turning point intertwine or interact with your spiritual journey? How would your life have been different if it had not occurred? How would your faith have been different if it had not occurred?

Sensitizing Questions for First Small Group Meeting Part Two

My Family of Origin

1. Who held the power in your family of origin? Why? Who made the decisions? How did you know?
2. Who offered support, warmth, and nurturance? Why? Who did you go to for comfort? Who did you confide in?
3. What major family members have you been closest to? Why?
4. What important family members did you know the least? Feel least close to? Why? Who should you have been close to but for some reason were not?
5. Did you like your family? Why or why not?
6. What was best about your family? Worst about it? What were the strengths and weaknesses in your family?
7. Was there anyone in your family you were afraid of? Why?
8. Who were the heroes in your family? The family favorites? How did you know?
9. Whose faith stance were you closest to in your family of origin? An uncle who was a skeptic? A grandmother who taught you Bible stories? An aunt who took you to Sunday School?
10. What was the feeling tone in your family? (e.g. happy, sad, crowded, spacious, noisy, quiet, warm, cold?)
11. What were the major areas of conflict, problems, and issues in your family? Religion? Money? Chores? Parental discord?
12. How do you experience the spiritual roots from your family? What were the spiritual seeds planted in your soul as a child that began to sprout later, or that you needed to dig up and weed out?
13. What were the rules in your family, the “should” and the “oughts”?
14. What events and experiences have torn your family apart or have made your family stronger?
15. Were you loved? How did you know?



Sensitizing Questions for Second Small Group Meeting Part One

My Life Work

(career, employment, or how I spent my time)

- A. What sort of images come to mind when you hear the term “career”?
- B. To what extent can we also think of our religion or faith journey as our “career”, or of our aesthetic productions (art, music, poetry, writing, etc.), or of any other activity that has helped to define and shape the use of our time and energy as our career?
- C. People may have a number of careers, a sequence of careers, a sabbatical when laid off from work and seeking employment, etc.

Sensitizing Questions:

1. How did you get into your major life work? How did you find it or how did it find you? What role did family expectations play in your choices? Did a teacher influence you? A minister? A family friend? A relative? When did you begin your life work?
2. How early did you formulate your life career goals? What did you want to be when you grew up? How have childhood interests, passions, teachers influenced the path your life work has taken? How much choice did you really have?
3. What has been the developmental course of your life-work? Has it been continuous? Discontinuous? What have been the peaks and the valleys? Have there been major or minor setbacks? Major changes in focus? Have you had a sequence or series of careers? Do you see any connecting links between your careers? Which one gave you the most satisfaction? Why?
4. What have been the biggest influences in directing the path of your career once chosen? For example, have there been people, places, events?
5. If you do not have a major life-work (yet), what would you like to do? Why?
6. If you feel you have finished your major life work, how do you evaluate it?
7. How have your career choices and experiences influenced your spirituality? How have spirituality and faith impacted your life work?
8. How has your work provided new options? Limited your options?
9. Are you “on time” in your career, or ahead or behind in some of your expectations?
10. What has been (are) the challenges of your life work? Your successes? The problems? The failures?

11. If you have more than one life-work, identify which of these has been the most important to you? Why?
12. What has been unique or special about your work experiences? Place of work? Travel? People?
13. What have you enjoyed most about your life work? Least?
14. If you had it to do over again, how would you develop differently along your life-work path? Would you choose the same life work? Why or why not?
15. How did gender, culture, and family expectations impact your career choices and experiences?
16. During times of difficulty in your work life, how did you utilize or feel cut off from your spirituality?
17. If you are retired, how do you or how might you consider retirement as related to your life-work? Is it a new life-work? How?
18. If you are retired, how do you or how might you consider your retirement as related to your spirituality? What changes have you experienced in your spirituality since retirement?

Sensitizing Questions for Second Small Group Meeting Part Two

The Roles of Money in My Life

1. What role did money play in your family? What were you taught about money? Was it scarce or plentiful? Were you poor or well off? How did you learn that?
2. How did your family's money compare to other people's money?
3. In your life, how important is it to make money?
4. Does money have any relationship to love in your life? How?
5. What was the first time you earned any money? How did you feel about it? How did it affect your later ideas about money?
6. What have been your greatest financial successes?
7. What have been your worst financial mistakes?
8. How central is the role that money plays in your life?
9. Does money have any relationship to your self-esteem?
10. How much do you think about money? Do you worry about money?
11. How does money relate to your spiritual (or deeper) self?
12. Do you regard yourself as generous or stingy? Why?
13. Have you ever borrowed money? How did you feel about it?
14. Are you a good or poor manager of money? Why?
15. Does your "last will and testament" reflect your spiritual values? How do you feel about it?
16. In what ways does your use (spending, borrowing, saving, donating and investing) of money reflect your deepest value system? How not?

### Sensitizing Questions for Third Small Group Meeting Part One

#### My Health and Body Image

The image of your body and your health has many aspects, objective features, and subjective feelings. In part, it involves an implied comparison with other persons, whether you were (are) more or less healthy, stronger or weaker, coordinated or clumsy, attractive or unattractive. How do you regard your body and health? What has been the history of your health and body image?

1. What was your health like as a baby? As a child? Adolescent? Young adult? Middle-aged adult? Older adult?
2. Were you considered a sickly child? If so, what were the consequences for your development?
3. Were you a fast developing or slow developing child? Were you ahead or behind in your development as an adolescent? What feelings did you have about that?
4. How well do you get along with your body? How does your body communicate with you? Has your relationship with your body changed over the decades? How?
5. If body and spirit are intertwined, how does your body and/or your health impact your spirit?
6. What health problems have you experienced in your life? How did you feel about each of these? How did you cope with these problems?
7. In what ways does your body react to stress? Has this changed during your life? What do you do in response to your body's stress signals?
8. What have you done during your life to help/hurt your health?
9. What parts of your body do you like best? Least? Why? How has this changed over your life?
10. What have you done to alter, change, or improve your health and physical self over your life?
11. How do you regard your body in terms of female or male image?
12. If you could change your body in any way, how would you want it to be different?
13. What have pain and illness taught you about yourself? About your spiritual life?
14. Do you experience a relationship between your physical health and your spiritual health? Describe this relationship.

### Sensitizing Questions for Third Small Group Meeting Part Two

#### My Loves and Hates

Love is a strong emotional attachment to a particular person, place or thing. Absence of the love object causes distress in the form of loneliness, anxiety and longing. What have been the major loves of your life?

Hate is a strong feeling of dislike or ill will toward some person, place, or thing. What have been the hates or strong aversions in your life?

#### Sensitizing Questions:

1. What persons, place, or things aroused your greatest feelings of love when you were a child?
2. Who or what was your first love? How did you know?
3. Who in your life made you feel loved and why?
4. Were you ever consumed by love? When and under what circumstances?
5. What has been the role of love in your life? How has it changed over time?
6. How has love been related to your spirituality?
7. Why did your loves end? What happens when you lose a love? Did your feelings change or did you lose the object of your love?
8. How have your ideas about love changed during your life?
9. What have been the major hates of your life? What places, people, events, characteristics of people, objects, ideas, or kinds of behavior cause you to feel extreme dislike?
10. Have you ever hated someone so much you wished they would die?
11. What were your major dislikes as a child? How did they change with time?
12. How have you expressed your hatred? Words? Deeds? Bodily?
13. How has hatred related to your spirituality?
14. Have your hates changed over the years, or have they remained the same?
15. Does your faith incorporate or reflect your hates? How or how not?
16. If you could wish ill upon some person by voodoo or magic, who would it be?
17. Do you tend to express your hate or keep it inside?
18. Do you have strong unexpressed feelings of love for some person, place, or thing?

19. When you were growing up, what were you taught about love and hate? How have your ideas changed?

### Sensitizing Questions for Fourth Small Group Meeting Part One

#### Sexual Identity, Sex Roles, and Sexual Experiences

Sexuality includes our sense of ourselves as male or female (sexual identity), our ideas about appropriate sex role behavior, and our sexual experiences. What has been the history of your sexual development, including the development of your identity as male/female, your concepts of appropriate role behavior, your sexual experiences?

#### Sensitizing Questions:

1. When did you first learn/realize that you were a boy or a girl? When did you first realize that little boys and girls were different? How did you feel about that?
2. What toys did you use and what games did you play when you were a child? Were any kinds of play, toys, games forbidden? What clothes were you dressed in as a child? What significance did this have in the development of your sexual identity?
3. Were you a “tomboy”? A “sissy”? A “fraidy cat”? Did you ever wish you had been born the opposite sex? Why?
4. What did your parents, teachers, relatives, and ministers teach you about what “good” girls and boys did and did not do? What were the “rules” for being a boy or a girl? What were your parents’ views about your sexuality? Your grandparents’ views?
5. Where did you get your sex education (from parents, friends, books, school, religious training)? Where and when did you learn the facts of life?
6. What were your early sexual experiences (such as doctor-and-nurse games)? Did you have childhood sweethearts or “crushes”?
7. Have you had any traumatic sexual experiences?
8. What have been your concepts or models of the “ideal” man or the “ideal” woman? How have these ideas changed as you have grown up and grown older?
9. At what points in your development and maturing has your faith been relevant to your sexuality?
10. What are your concepts about the “ideal” relationship between two people?
11. How would you characterize yourself as a man or woman? How has this changed? What “traditionally” masculine or feminine aspects can you identify in yourself?
12. How do you relate to members of the opposite sex? How has this changed?

13. What has been the history of your sexual experiences? How have they changed as you have grown older? What factors (e.g. aging, health, menopause, religion, money, or retirement) have affected your sexual identity and experiences?
14. How do you feel about your sexuality? Have your ideas about appropriate sexual behavior changed over time (e.g. attitudes toward same sex relationships, marriage, and child rearing)?
15. If you had/have children, how are they being raised similarly or differently regarding their sexuality than you were raised?
16. Has your sexuality been impacted by your spirituality? How?
17. Has your spirituality been impacted by your sexuality? How?



### Sensitizing Questions for Fourth Small Group Meeting Part Two

#### My Experiences with Death or My Ideas About Death

Death affects our lives in many ways. The loss of a beloved pet as a child can be quite powerful. The death of parents, grandparents, friends, a spouse, a child, a brother or a sister, a mentor, all can affect us profoundly.

How have your experiences with death affected your life and your character? How have your reactions to death changed over the years? How have your ideas concerning your own death changed?

1. How did you learn about death as a child? Did you ever lose a pet that was like a member of the family? What did you think or feel when your pet died?
2. How was death talked about and treated in your family? Did it mystify you? Frighten you? Did your feelings or ideas about death seem to be different from other people you knew? How?
3. When did you go to your first funeral? How did it feel to you? How did you react? Did you talk to anyone about your experience? Who?
4. Were you ever so sick or injured that you thought you might die? Did this change your life? Why or why not?
5. What have been your close calls with death? Have your ideas about your own death changed over the decades? How do you feel about your death now?
6. How do you experience death as a person of faith? Of doubt?
7. Have you ever wanted to die? What did you do about those feelings?
8. How has the death of a friend or family member through suicide impacted your life?
9. Do you feel guilty about anyone's death? Helpless? Angry? Resentful? Abandoned? Have you ever felt responsible for anyone's death?
10. Is death an enemy or a friend for you? Is it to be dreaded and fought, or welcomed?
11. What kind of death would you like to have?
12. What was the most significant death you have experienced? How did it change you or your life? What impact does it have on your spirituality?

## Appendix D

### Empathetic Listening Materials

#### Practice Sheet<sup>4</sup>

These are one-line sentences that you might encounter in your ministry at Ojai UMC, or in our life beyond the church. It's hard to know the whole context, so this is not really like "life." It's just a sample for practice.

(ALMOST) EVERY SINGLE RESPONSE IS AN OKAY RESPONSE. WE'RE USING THIS, HOWEVER, TO EXPLORE HOW EMPATHY MIGHT AFFECT OUR CARING. I KNOW YOU'D PROBABLY NOT SAY ANY OF THESE EXACTLY, BUT IF YOU HAD TO CHOOSE, WHICH WOULD YOU CHOOSE?

Try responding first with how you would *naturally* respond. CIRCLE the letter. Then, mark an "X" next to the letter of what you think is the empathetic response.

1. At the visitor's table:

"You had communion today, do you always have communion?"

Let's assume that the very first thing you say is a straight-forward answer to the question, so you say, "We serve communion on the first Sunday of the month."

**What might you say next:**

- a. You have an interest in Communion.
- b. I like communion, too.
- c. Many United Methodist Churches serve communion 4 times a year.
- d. It's great you like communion.
- e. Have you been used to communion weekly?
- f. You'll like it here.

2. When you deliver bread on Monday to a new visitor:

"I've been having a lot of questions recently, so I felt like finding a church."

**What might you respond?:**

- a. Good for you—it's good to ask questions!
- b. You've been pondering and want to find a church that may help you to think.
- c. I'm sure you'll enjoy Ojai UMC – it's a great church.
- d. Sometimes I think I have answers, then I have lots of questions all over again, too.
- e. We have some classes for people during the week if you'd like to join in.
- f. How long has it been since you've been to church?

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<sup>4</sup> From Carolyn Bohler's Class on Empathetic Listening at Aldersgate UMC, Tustin, CA. The author has slightly modified questions to make them appropriate for Ojai UMC, Ojai, CA.

3. When you're teaching Sunday School a child says:  
 "My mom says God's answers are in the Bible; my dad says God didn't stop talking to us 2,000 years ago. Who is right?"  
**What might you say?**
- I'll tell you what I think.
  - You know, United Methodists do have a lot of different opinions.
  - You'll be fine. A lot of people don't agree on beliefs of God.
  - How often do they get into talks about God and the Bible?
  - How good you are to ask questions like this. Christians should ask questions.
  - Your mom and dad have different opinions about God and you don't know what to do about that.
4. You telephone a congregation member, who is ill, and they say:  
 "Thank you so much for calling, I'm so discouraged, I don't know how long I can take this."  
**What might your first response be (knowing you'll have a longer conversation, too.)?**
- Do you want me to call the Pastor?
  - I care about you so much.
  - You've been ill so long, you're getting pretty low.
  - There was an article about your illness, and it said depression is natural.
  - You'll pull through; you and God will get through this. You will.
  - Don't get discouraged. Keep a bright outlook.
5. You are told about someone who is in the midst of breaking up a relationship, and you're their close friend in the congregation, so you call and ask how they are, and they say:  
 "Right now I feel my whole world is caving in, but I know others get through this, and I will, too, eventually."  
**What might your first response be?**
- Would you like me to pray for you?
  - I can't imagine how it must be to make such a huge change.
  - You are really feeling chaotic now, but you have confidence you'll make it.
  - Did you know there are good grief classes locally that are for all kinds of grief, even yours?
  - You WILL make it, you really will.
  - You were very patient to stay together as long as you did.

6. Prayer Chain call—you're told by the person who calls to *ask* for prayer:  
 "I don't know what to ask you to pray for. On the one hand, I'd like to get well and I do believe in healing. But, I've lived a good life and maybe this illness is my farewell—I am very old and we have to die eventually."  
  - a. You'd like prayers but aren't really sure whether we all should pray for your healing or maybe God's wisdom in your living and dying.
  - b. Never give up hope; don't doubt. You can be healed.
  - c. You'll know what to pray for.
  - d. I understand.
  - e. Your illness, a doctor explained to me, is not really life-threatening.
  - f. How old are you?
  
7. Someone you live with (a different generation, perhaps), comes home and heads to their room saying, "Not a big problem, I just need some time to myself."  
**What might be your first response?**  
  - a. What happened?
  - b. Don't just go to your room—tell me.
  - c. Something happened; I'll wait to hear.
  - d. I've had a horrible day too.
  - e. It's 6:00; we need to be at church in 45 minutes.
  - f. Okay, I know you'll be fine, you always are.

What have you had people say to you that you'd like to have us discuss as a group?

1.

2.

3.

Practice Sheet "Answers"<sup>5</sup>

1. a = empathy  
b = "I" statement  
c = Information  
d = Judgmental  
e = Question  
f = Reassuring

2. a = Judgmental  
b = Empathy  
c = Reassuring  
d = "I" statement  
e = Information  
f = Question

3. a = "I" statement  
b = Information  
c = Reassuring  
d = Question  
e = Judgmental  
f = Empathy

4. a = Question  
b = "I" statement  
c = Empathy  
d = Information  
e = Reassurance  
f = Judgmental

5. a = Question  
b = "I" statement  
c = Empathy  
d = Information  
e = Reassurance  
f = Judgmental

6. a = Empathy  
b = Judgmental  
c = Reassurance  
d = "I" statement  
e = Information  
f = Question

7. a = Question  
b = Judgmental  
c = Empathy  
d = "I" statement  
e = Information  
f = Reassurance

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<sup>5</sup> From Carolyn Bohler's Class on Empathetic Listening at Aldersgate UMC, Tustin, CA.

### Kinds of Responses<sup>6</sup>

Reassurance = you suggest that things will turn out all right. This often tends to diminish their feelings, subtly to suggest that they ought not feel as they do, or you don't want to hear of them thinking or feeling that way. While looking on the bright side, it negates the existence of the uncertainty. It shuts them off from sharing more, for you might not take that seriously either.

Interpretive = amateur psychologist, explaining why or how the person is feeling or thinking as they are. You are the expert; they are left feeling an "object" just analyzed, not unique, for you've categorized them.

Judgmental = whether judging their thoughts, feelings, or behavior as good or bad, you've assumed the role of one who has the ability (and right) to declare what is right/wrong, best/not good

"I" statements = saying something about yourself which seems to parallel what the person has said. On RARE occasions, this may be helpful, but usually it takes the attention from the speaker, moving it towards you. It communicates that you're not especially focused on the person.

Question = or probing, asking for some information. This often leaves the impression that you think that if you knew enough, about the facts or the person, then YOU could solve the problem. On SOME occasions, it is necessary to know more, but these are far fewer than we tend to think. A question now and then is fine and may show interest, but "20 questions," is an interrogation, and you remain "in charge," thereby limiting what they will say.

Empathy = the desired response for MOST OF THE TIME! It communicates in fresh words (if possible) what you have just heard. It tries to get into the frame of reference (shoes?) of the other. IT DOES NOT HAVE TO BE RIGHT TO BE EMPATHIC. The person could respond, "No, not exactly," then explain some more, and still you have been empathic.

It shows an attempt to mirror what is present before you. The mirror can include what you see as well as what you hear ("You say you are ok, but you appear sad, to me.") When you get really good, it includes, too, what you have heard in previous conversations, a larger picture.

Sometimes this sounds funny, like a parrot. Unless you use the exact words the person has said and use empathic responses 90% of the time, the other will not likely feel parroted. They will feel you are trying to understand.

Informative = giving advice or information, not at all with judgment, but usually a direct answer to a question. This is often essential, but sometimes we fall into the trap of giving

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<sup>6</sup> From Carolyn Bohler's class on Empathetic Listening at Aldersgate UMC, Tustin, CA.

lots of advice or information, when what the person needs is to be heard. With this option, again, we are “in charge,” the authority.

The goal is to help persons over the long haul. If they feel respected and are expected to have authority over their own lives, our responses reinforce their taking that responsibility. When we mirror them, we are not condoning, agreeing, or suggesting, but rather saying, “Is this what I see?” They have plenty of people who take the authority over them, to judge, advise, interpret, reassure. We can hear. It often happens that HEARING COMES BEFORE SPEECH! (Could God be the “Ear” of the Universe, rather than just the Word?)

Mirrors function not only to share the good, but to see the real. Mirrors show wrinkles (exactly as many as there are), and frowns, not just cosmetics and smiles. They risk seeing the whole person, and in doing that, the person can gain honest self-appraisals.

The goal is not to give Empathic responses 100% of the time. An occasional question, piece of information, “I”-statement, gesture of reassurance can help the process.

When we habitually respond with Advice/Information, or Reassurance, or Judgment, then we need to take responsibility for looking at ourselves and questioning what we consider our role. We can PRACTICE Empathic responses at home, at our jobs, on vacation, with children, in restaurants. The results are amazing!

## Appendix E

## Pre- and Post-Evaluation Tool

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer the following questions by grading on a scale of one to five.

1=does not apply to me

2=applies only occasionally

3=applies some of the time

4=applies most of the time

5=applies all of the time

1. I feel God's presence deeply and am confident of God's love for me.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Please explain.

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2. I listen intently for God and seek ways to show God's love to others.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Please explain.

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3. I know the inherent value of my life and feel I am unique and special.

1            2            3            4            5

Please explain.

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4. I am knowledgeable of my strengths and weaknesses and know how to use them to help others.

1            2            3            4            5

Please explain.

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5. I am able to put self aside in order to listen empathetically to others.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Please explain.

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6. I help others to strengthen their own spiritual journeys by listening without needing to compare their journey to my own.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Please explain.

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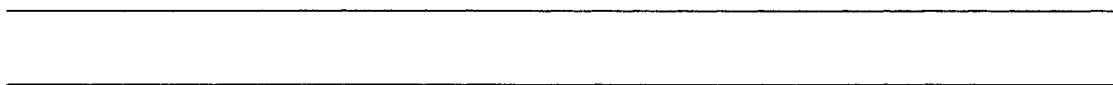
7. I feel comfortable in my role as an evangelist.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Please explain.

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